

Regional Foster Placements

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Regional Foster Placements is a privately owned independent fostering agency. It has six offices covering locations across the UK. The agency offer a range of short term and long term placements. The agency pride themselves on providing environments which enables children and young people to fulfil their potential and lead positives lives.

At the time of this inspection, Regional Foster Placements had 25 fostering households providing foster care to 30 children and young people in both short term and long term placements.

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 very positive about their experience of care. One young person said: 'From the moment I came into this house I felt at home'. They go on to describe how they feel safe and accepted and part of the family. Monthly summaries capture the child or young person overall progress and records demonstrate that outcomes are good.

The agency has been particularly successful in placing sibling groups together. Low placement disruptions demonstrates good matching where children and young people experience stable, lengthy placements.

Children's participation is a particular strength of the agency and an activity co-

ordinator contributes significantly to ensure that children have a voice and are heard.

Skilled and experienced social workers recruit and assess foster carers with a range of expertise and experience. A dedicated and knowledgeable fostering panel are diligent in their role and responsibility to ensure the process of approval is robust. Approved carers offer a nurturing, caring environment in which children and young people can thrive.

The experienced and committed staff team deliver effective supervision to foster carers. The wide array of training assists them in understanding the needs of traumatised children. The agency provides a therapeutic service to support both child or young person and foster carers to understand behaviours and offer strategies to manage these. These effective inputs and support improve outcomes for the children and young people in their care.

Foster carers speak highly of the agency. They can rely on a well-organised, dependable organisation that is proactive and very supportive in assisting them to execute their role and responsibility as foster carers and in meeting the needs of children and young people placed in their care. Foster carers feel included and valued members of the team.

Leaders and managers have a clear plan for continued service improvement with the welfare of children and young people placed at the centre and where improved outcomes is the priority target.

This inspection has identified a number of shortfalls. These include; having no fostering panel vice chair in post. The fostering panel minutes are not consistently accurate and do not record the reasons for the terms of a foster carers recommended approval to the agency decision maker. The agency does monitor the service; however, it lacks a robust system for evaluating and improving the quality of the service. Not all employees, including administrative and support staff receive supervision that is timely and recorded appropriately. Verbal verifications of the written personal references received have not consistently been undertaken. A number of foster carers had not completed the training, support and development standards within 12 months following approval.

In considering meeting the shortfalls identified, two statutory requirements and five recommendations are set to assist the service with continued improvement.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
must appoint panel members including – one or two persons who may act as a chair if the person appointed to chair the panel is absent or that office is vacant ("the vice chairs") from the persons on the central list (Regulation 23 (4) (ii))	17/08/2015
must maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1) (b))	17/08/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure that the panel chair ensures written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)

ensure that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify written references for all people working in or for the fostering service and members of the fostering panel (NMS 19.1)

ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)

ensure a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff (NMS 24.5)

ensure the fostering service and foster carer contribute effectively to each child’s Placement Plan review. (NMS 31.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency successfully offers placements to sibling groups. Of the 30 children and young people in placement 13 are placed alongside brothers and sisters. This maintains a strong sense of identity for children and young people and supports those sibling relationships through into adulthood.

Children and young people experience stable home environments where they feel safe and that they are part of the family. One young person sums up his experience, he said: 'There are so many things about why this place is great, it would be hard to pick one but probably it is, that I am living somewhere that the carers love me and take good care of me'.

Information about the foster family is available to children and young person prior to placement. It offers a visual insight into the family they will be living with. In addition, each child and young person receives a welcome box filled with various practical and fun items and a hand-sewn blanket from a local voluntary partnership group. As a result, children and young people feel valued and welcomed into their foster family.

The service has produced a comprehensive and engaging Children's Guide for the children and young people in care. This is available in two versions, one for children under 12 years and one for older young people. Children and young people reported that their carers spent time with them looking at the guide, giving further explanation if required. This ensures that each child or young person in care has the required information in an appealing format. Foster carers support them to understand it as they share it with them in a sensitive and caring manner.

Children and young people make good educational progress. All children and young people of school age are in education and each child has a Personal Education Plan, which sets out individual aims and targets. Foster carers support children and young people with their education and have ambitions for their future. One young person said: 'I am going to college after the summer; the carers helped me to find a place. I am going to do catering and I'm looking forward to that'. Another said: 'I am doing really well, I am going to be a physicist'. Young People are able to identify where they are making progress, improving in school attendance and having aspirations for the future.

Children and young people in care have experienced early life trauma, which will often present itself as particularly challenging behaviour to manage. The agency recognises this and to support children, young people and carers they commission an independent therapist. The therapist works directly with either the child or young person or supports and guides the carer to understand the meaning of behaviour and how positive change is achieved by the care they provide. This has certainly proved beneficial to the wellbeing of children and young people.

Young people are learning to take responsibility for their behaviours including those more detrimental behaviours such as, self-harm. This improves their sense of self, builds self-esteem and overall outcomes. Children and young people maintain good health through routine medicals, regular health checks and a healthy lifestyle.

The agency are committed to engaging children and young people in fun activities and social opportunities. They employ a children's activity co-ordinator who works with individual children to support them and enhance placement stability. The activity co-ordinator is also a key staff member in promoting children's participation. The agency has Children in Care Council who meet to discuss matters relating to their experience and supported to take their important matters forward. Participation is further embraced by involving children and young people in care in the recruitment of staff and the training of foster carers. One member of staff interviewed by young people commented, 'it had a powerful impact, it really brought home the reasons why you do the job'.

Views sought from social work staff and an Independent Reviewing Officer confirms that foster carers provide children and young people with secure, stable and nurturing family placements where they have thrived and outcomes have significantly improved. Foster carers complete comprehensive child focussed reports which are shared at childcare reviews and complete in depth monthly progress reports which summarise where the child or young person's is at and the progress they make.

Children and young people are very positive about their experiences of being looked after. All described a positive family based placement where they feel an accepted part of the family. Foster carers effectively engage with them, they are inclusive and support them to identify what is best for them. Children and young people are involved in all aspects of daily life and the decisions about their care. One young person summed up his experience simply by saying 'This is my home'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency recruits a range of carers to meet the diverse and complex needs of looked after children and young people. The majority live within the local authority facilitating children and young people to be placed close to their family, school and community. The recruitment, assessment and preparation training processes are robust and undertaken by a skilled workforce. The relatively small team of social work staff have come to know the foster carers well and have used this knowledge to match children and young people appropriately. As the agency grows this method of matching will become less available and effective, a clear skills based category of approval is required.

The matching process has improved over the last year and a clear procedure ensures that foster carers receive referral and pre-admission risk assessment information prior to a child being placed. At the point of placement a placement plan and the authority delegated to carers is completed. This process offers carers informed

choices and clarity about roles and responsibilities in accepting a child or young person into their family. The agency is effective in matching; the low numbers of disruptions and placement breakdowns demonstrates this.

The experienced staff team are committed to delivering a high quality service to foster carers. They offer regular, effective supervision to foster carers to enhance understanding and improve practice. Foster carers experience very positive levels of support stating, 'nothing is too much trouble'. The agency provides out of hours support to carers. One carer said: 'They don't want you to go through anything alone'.

Foster carers are enthusiastic about their role and feel valued members of the team. This family run agency offers foster carers the opportunity to have close working relationships with all those employed within the service. They have confidence in the support offered. One carer said: 'We just need to pick up the phone and if your worker is not in it doesn't matter someone will call you straight back'. This high level of support creates a trusting relationship between the agency and its carers and is a key factor in retaining skilled and experienced carers to meet the needs of children and young people.

The agency offer foster carers a wide range of training opportunities delivered by both internal and external providers. Foster carers access this new learning through training events, on-line study, in small groups or on a one to one basis. Foster carers reported this as one of the agencies particular strengths; a carer commented 'We have oodles of training'. Should foster carers be faced with a specific issue, they report that the staff or manager either do the training themselves or bring someone in to offer support. This ensures that foster carers are equipped with the necessary knowledge and understanding to meet the complex needs of children and young people in care. However, the agency has not been successful in ensuring foster carers complete the Training and Development Standards within one year post approval. Workshops and individual sessions are now available to assist carers and the agency in reaching this requirement.

Sufficient numbers of individuals from a wide range of disciplines and experience make up the membership and carry out the functions of fostering panel. Panel members are passionate about getting it right for children and young people. Panel training enhances their knowledge base. They are diligent in their review of panel paperwork, recognising the strengths of applicants and carers and offer an independent challenge as necessary. The skilled and knowledgeable panel chair and panel advisor support panel's deliberations to ensure that children and young people receive the quality care from competent and nurturing foster carers.

The fostering panel needs to pay attention to two areas of improvement. The panel minutes are not consistently accurate and the panel is without a vice chair, of which there can be two. The agency has plans to meet both of these improvement areas.

Placement plans and risk assessments are in place for all children and young people. However, updating reports is an area that requires attention in order that children and young people and have their current placement needs and assessed risks

identified and in place. This will ensure that their foster placement meets their current needs and that all safety is managed by the identified risks.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people report that they feel safe living with their foster carers and refer to them as their safe people.

Children and young people placed within this agency rarely go missing from care. Policies and procedures underpin practice to minimise the risk of children and young people going missing. For those that do, foster carers acted swiftly and appropriately to inform all the relevant professional bodies to ensure the children and young person's safe return. The relationship formed and maintain between the foster carer and the child or young person reduces the risk of going missing. Children and young people are valued members of the family where carers listen to their views and feelings and where they say, if they have worries or concerns, they talk to their carer's.

Safeguarding underpins all foster carers training. It forms part of the preparation to foster training and is central to child protection and abuse training. The training and safeguarding ethos prepares foster carers with a conscious awareness of the likely or actual effects of abuse and neglect. Foster carers are knowledgeable and act in accordance with child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Foster carers report incidents appropriately and timely to protect and support children and young people. This ensures they receive the appropriate resources or service and that investigation commences as required.

Foster carers practice safer caring and family safer caring agreements are active, although some are in the process of review. When potentially harmful behaviour is evident social work staff are proactive in working with the wider professional team to secure appropriate resources for both the child or young person, and where necessary, the foster carer. This ensures that the foster carer has the understanding and skills to meet their high level and complex needs and that the risks to, and the welfare of those children and young people are safeguarded.

The manager works with social care and safeguarding authorities across a large geographical area. The policy and procedures for managing allegations are good, setting out lines of advice and enquiry with all statutory agencies.

The recruitment and vetting of foster carers is very good. As part of the assessment process, completed checks and references are in place prior to presentation to panel for approval. Children and young people are safeguarded as a result of this robust practice. Full employment checks are carried out for all staff, however, some verbal verifications in respect of the professional written references received were not completed. This does not offer the same level of robust safeguarding to children and young people..

Unannounced visits to foster homes are undertaken at least yearly. This practice offer a snap shot of family life at any given time and ensures children and young people are safe and environments suitable. Foster carers understand safe practice well. The family safer caring agreement is a live document, which is updated as required and an annual health and safety check of the carers' property assesses its continued suitability. As a result, children and young people's welfare is safeguarded.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The leaders and managers deliver good outcomes for children and young people. The Registered Manager has been in post since 2014. She is a qualified social worker and has significant experience of working with children and families across the range of social work practices. A management development plan sets out a clear vision for the service with the priority focus being 'improving outcomes for children and young people'. The manager notes how the experience and skill of the committed staff team and foster carers work together to provide quality care to children and young people.

The relatively new staff team share the same drive and passion to deliver the best of services to children, young people and their foster carers. They have extensive experience of working with families and some are experienced trainers who deliver new learning to the foster carer cohort. All staff are committed to contributing to service development and improvement, they bring their past experience and good working practices models to embed into service systems and output. They have access and opportunities to undertake appropriate training to further their development. Their focus is to support and guide carers in improving outcome to children and young people.

Social work staff are not receiving regular formal supervision and although informal supervision is a common feature a written record is not being made or kept. Administrative and support staff are either not receiving supervision or it is irregular. Therefore, case discussion, decision-making and staff development is not always evident. While there is minimal impact on children and young people due to the experience of the staff, records of supervision are inconsistent.

The agency has an up to date Statement of Purpose that sets out the ethos, the aims and the objectives of the service. They notify the Ofsted of any revision to the document within 28 days.

The manager has updated the complaints procedure to include the current address of Ofsted. This information is also available to children and young people through the revised Children's Guides.

The manager has developed strategies for consultation with internal and external

stakeholders. Foster carers report that they meet regularly with their social workers and can raise any matters they may wish too. The Registered Manager attends foster carers support groups throughout the region, which offers opportunity to share information and raise any matters of concern. Similarly, the directors of the organisation are frequent attenders of events. Foster carers report that they are available and open to discussion. The introduction of the Children in Care Council and the employment of an activities co-ordinator have provided good opportunity for consultation with children and young people. Their feedback has informed service development and practice. One young person involved in staff interviews, described how being part of the process and offering feedback ensured only staff who are able to communicate and show a real interest in children and young people are hired. The manager regularly meets with commissioners of placing authorities and attends providers' events; these meetings offer insight into the services required by external agencies and informs the agency's recruitment strategy and business plan. The agency works to cost effectively meet the demand by providing quality stable placements in which children and young people can thrive.

The children's activities co-ordinator is a key appointment in ensuring that many opportunities exist to all children and young people to engage positively in fun and leisure activities. The agency recognises that children of foster carers undertake a significant role in being part of a family that fosters. To support them in their role, they too are part of a children's group when fun and leisure activities are in place. They can also access one to one time with the activities co-ordinator or with their fostering social worker. This values the role of the child that fosters and supports them in it.

Children and young people are very much placed at the centre of the service. They say that they are involved in making decisions about their day-to-day life by foster carers who are supportive and offer them a family life where they feel free to discuss all things. Most children and young people identify significantly with the agency, they know the staff and the manager knows every one of them.

The manager continues to all monitor aspects of the service as required, however, there is no evaluation of this information in which to inform further improvements in the quality of care provided. All notifiable events are completed and follow up action undertaken as required.

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.