

# Break Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	11/03/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The Break Fostering Service is run by a charitable organisation. The fostering agency provides therapeutic foster placements to children and young people aged between seven and 18. The agency provides long-term placements with built in respite care. The agency has 10 sets of carers who are approved to provide single child placements and respite care.

### 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 fostering agency sets out to look after children with very complex needs. They do this very well and consequently children's needs are met effectively and they make very good progress. Children live in safe, stable placements and develop secure attachments to their carers. This provides a stable base for carers to work with children. The agency prepares carers well, including being very open with them about the expectations and challenges of the fostering task. Foster carers are enthusiastic and child-centred. Commissioners describe them as 'resourceful, pro-active and committed'.

Carers are fully included as part of the team around the child. In some cases this involves being involved in the therapeutic work which external agencies undertake with the child. They are valued and respected by social workers and supervising social workers. Carers' knowledge of children is used to inform the plans for those children. There is efficient working between the service, its carers and other agencies so that the care of children is consistent and effective and children are protected.

There is Registered Manager in post who has appropriate qualifications and experience to carry out her role. Fostering agency staff and foster carers value her work. The size of the agency helps to ensure that managers are visible and well known to carers, staff and placing authorities. There are some areas where oversight and monitoring has not been as effective as it could be and this has resulted in some shortfalls. In other areas there is effective monitoring, feeding into development plans which include feedback from stakeholders. These are used to improve the quality of the service.

The one requirement and most of the recommendations from the previous inspection have been addressed. Repeated recommendations have been made about children being encouraged to read their files and panel recruitment checks. There was one breach to regulations, but this has had limited impact on the wellbeing and safety of young people. Many of the shortfalls identified in this inspection relate to management oversight and lack of systems to monitor across all areas, leading to isolated rather than widespread shortfalls. These include ensuring that all carers have undertaken appropriate training, all panel members have annual appraisals, fully concluding matters when carers resign, ensuring there is clarity over panel recommendations and that panel act fully independently in making recommendations as to the terms of carers' approval.

## 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
Ensure that where the foster panel recommends approval of an application, it recommends terms on which the approval is given. (Regulation 25(1)(b))	30/09/2015

### Recommendations

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

Ensure that children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements (NMS 26.6)

Ensure that carers receive training on first aid (NMS 6.7)

Ensure that the fostering service follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in panel member recruitment. This relates to verifying references by telephone and DBS checks (NMS 19.2)

Ensure that the fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures on recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of the fostering panel (NMS 14.1)

Ensure that when a foster carer resigns, the fostering service form a view about the person's future suitability to be a foster carer. This relates to cases where there have been concerns about the foster carer before resignation (Statutory Guidance Volume 4, paragraph 5.59)

Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service (NMS 25.1)

Ensure that the children's guide is produced in a format which is appropriate to the age, understanding and communication needs of children who may be fostered by the service (Statutory Guidance Volume 4, paragraph 4.3)

Ensure that all staff receive appropriate appraisals. This relates to panel members (Statutory Guidance Volume 4, paragraph 4.15)

Ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes into account all of the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel. (NMS 14.9)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are able to find out a lot about the foster carers and the homes they live in before they move. They get individualised copies of the children's guide with photos of the carers and their homes. They also have very thorough introductions so that they can get to know the carers before they move. Commissioners say that the agency plans meticulously and carers speak of sensitive introductions at the child's pace. The information and the preparation for the move helps children to understand what will happen and to feel less anxious about the process. This in turn helps them to settle into their new placements. Once in their placements they are looked after very well. They develop safe and secure attachments to their carers and this helps them to thrive and make significant progress. One placing social worker said that the child they work with had made 'genuine attachments to the carer' and that this was a first for that child. The expectation of the service is that children's placements will be long term. Foster carers are prepared for and committed to this so that children can feel secure in their placements, one carer spoke of the child they fostered wanting to go to university and that they would be keeping a bed for him at home.

Respite care is provided by the agency. They are well aware that respite can be unsettling to children, and plan respite in a way which minimises this risk. For example, the main carers will telephone the children every day while they are with their respite carers and children have sheets on which they can record what they have done with the respite carer, but also act as a visual guide to when they will return home to their main carer. The respite levels are arranged to meet the needs of individual children and support their placements. Children's views on respite care are recorded and taken into account.

Children receive a lot of support from their carers, but also from supporting social workers who have a high level of involvement with them. This support helps children to make very good progress in their education and in their social development. In turn this helps children to achieve more and have access to wider ranges of experiences. For example, carers work with children to help them understand and manage their behaviour so that they can take part in clubs, community activities and social activities like going out for a meal. For many of the children placed with the agency, this is seen as their last chance of being able to live in a family. One social worker spoke of a child being helped to manage their self-care skills by the carer. This was done at the child's pace and led to 'really good' results. Another child had to move schools due to the distance from the carer's home. The move did not take place straight away and this gave the child time to begin to settle in the placement and for the carer and agency to plan a successful move. This involved a visit to the school to meet the teacher on a Sunday, pictures of the new class being sent to the child, the opportunity to have 'leaving do' and be given a signed photo of all his classmates.

Children are listened to by their carers, the supervising social workers and the agency. Children see the supervising social workers often and know them so well

that they can and do speak to them about things that they are concerned about. Children are able to influence their daily lives and wider care plans which means they are more involved and build their self-esteem. However, children are not actively encouraged to read their files and contribute to them, so this area of involvement is not currently open to them.

Where appropriate, children are able to maintain realistic and beneficial relationships with their families. Carers undertake some notable work to achieve this. For example, children have had their parents watching them at sporting events and, gone out for meals with them. One social worker spoke of carers working 'so, so hard' to build a child's relationship with a member of their family. Children can see the positive relationships between carers and their families which helps them to feel less guilty and settle more effectively into their foster homes. It also helps children to have access to more information about their backgrounds and past experiences and to maintain relationships for the future.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency is small and the recruitment of carers has been slow. This is not surprising given the levels of ability and commitment which the agency is looking for in order to meet their aims as set out in the Statement of Purpose. The thoroughness of the recruitment and assessment process and the honesty of the agency in preparing carers for the task of fostering results in very effective and stable placements for children. Carers help children to feel part of their families and also their wider social networks. They are supported in this by the supervising social workers and frequent support groups which are run by a psychologist and which carers are expected to attend once a fortnight. There is a 24 hour on call system and carers feel very well supported in their role. Carers speak of the support they get as 'fantastic' and of agency staff as 'so sincere'. They feel respected by the agency. This helps them to maintain placements and to develop a good understanding of children's backgrounds and behaviours so they can work effectively with them.

There is a comprehensive training programme for carers which are relevant to their roles in providing good quality care for children. However, not all carers have undertaken first aid training in good time so may not have the knowledge to deal with any household accidents. The agency uses specific, recognised training programmes to help carers to develop an understanding of children's behaviour and ways of working with them. The supervision of carers by supervising social workers looks at carer's practice and how this relates to their training. When necessary carer's practice is challenged and discussed to help them provide better care for children. Carers give examples of how they have put their training into practice in their care of children. They have a clear focus on the needs of children. Social workers say that they are very impressed with the carers' and supervising social workers' ability to reflect. They also say that carers get help to see things from the children's points of views, respond appropriately and are very good at working with the care plan.

The fostering panel has a good range of members with appropriate levels of skills and experience. They contribute to the quality assurance function of the agency, using their observations to help the agency improve. They will not make a recommendation about the approval of carers unless they are satisfied that they have sufficient information. However, they have made recommendations on the terms on which approval is given based in part on their known views of the agency. While children are protected by the insistence on full and appropriate information about prospective carers, by limiting their recommendations about terms of approval, they are not operating fully independently. The possible impact of this is limited by the very careful matching of children with carers so that placements are unlikely to be made if carers are not able to meet the children's needs.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Carers help children to develop an understanding of their personal safety. They help them to take age-appropriate risks and develop skills to keep themselves safe. This can be through education and encouragement about road safety so that children are able to be more independent and take part in activities with their peers, or understanding about the impact of their behaviour on their safety. Plans for children, including safe care plans, are used to help develop safe ways of working with children and keep them safe. A carer spoke about how their supervising social worker helps them to think about safe care of the child. There have not been any incidents of children going missing from care, but there is clear guidance for carers on how to respond if there should be. There is also guidance and training on identifying and working with children who are at risk of sexual exploitation. Consequently carers are informed and prepared to help them keep children safe. Safeguarding procedures are regularly reviewed to ensure that they are effective and appropriate.

The vetting of staff is effective in order to reduce the potential for unsuitable adults to work with the children in the service. The records of vetting of panel members is not clear and so does not show that all appropriate checks have taken place in every case. While panel members do not have direct access to children, effective and clear checks are a part of the overall protection of children. There is an open culture within the agency which helps to protect children. Carers and staff are aware of the ways in which they can raise concerns within the agency and if required outside of it. Carers take part in safeguarding training and this is also included in the preparation to foster course. Supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits to foster carers at least once a year. They use these visits to check the safety and suitability of the placements.

Allegations or concerns about carers are referred to local authority child protection services. The agency works effectively with these services to ensure that concerns are looked into. Where necessary in the interests of children, the agency will



challenge decisions. If carers resign in situations where questions about their future suitability to be carers is in question, the agency has not always concluded matters to the best of their ability in order to inform any potential request for information from other agencies in the future.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The leaders and managers in the agency have developed very effective working relationships with placing local authorities and other services. There are particularly good working relationships with commissioning local authorities. A commissioner said they 'were delighted' when the agency set up the service and that they have 'excellent' working relationships. They describe carers as 'fantastic, 100% insightful and keen to support children in any way they can'. The shared view of the needs of children and how the service sets out to meet them helps to improve progress and outcomes for children.

Due to the small size of the agency the managers have a good overview of the service in many areas. This is supported by monitoring and listening to feedback from children, carers and staff. However, a lack of more formal and comprehensive oversight and monitoring has resulted in some areas identified in this report being missed by managers. There are also some gaps or lack of clarity in files and while these do not have a significant impact on children, they do reduce the oversight of the service. In one case the recommended variation to a carer's approval was not accurately identified so was neither agreed nor refused. While the carer had no need to use this variation, so there was no impact on children, there was the potential for this to cause confusion over roles and expectations. There are regular supervisions and appraisals of staff, but one panel member's appraisal is 3 months overdue, so there has not been a formal review of their performance and any areas of development.

The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the aims and functioning of the service so that parents, placing social workers or other interested parties can be aware of what the service sets out to do. There is a children's guide which contains relevant information. This is suitable for the older range of children who use the service, but not for the younger ones. They currently rely on carers or others going through the guide with them.

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## 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.