

Quality Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC048508
Inspection date 12/10/2015
Inspector Rosie Davie
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

Setting address 305 High Road, BENFLEET, Essex, SS7 5HA

Telephone number 01268 795597
Email admin@qualityfostercare.com
Registered person Quality Foster Care Limited
Registered manager Jennifer Paterson
Responsible individual Keeley Nash
Date of last inspection 17/02/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Located in Essex, Quality Foster Care is a local and small independent fostering agency in Benfleet. The current office base on the High Road is easily identifiable. There are 30 approved households offering emergency, short, and long-term placements for children of all ages. The agency works with a range of placing authorities in the surrounding geographical area.

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 founder led agency celebrated its 10th Anniversary in 2013. The celebrations included carers, their families, children, and staff gathering together to have fun in recognition of their many achievements.

Children receive a superb level of care. They are positive about their experiences in placement and with the agency. One young person said: 'They have all treated me like family since I first came here, since day one.'

The agency provides a combination of long term, short term and emergency family based experiences for complex, challenging children. The placing of sibling groups continues to be successful; a number have been living with their foster families for over three years. The registered manager has been in post for a number of years. Her knowledge and dedication brings continuity and consistency for children, carers, and staff. The agency continues to grow steadily. More than one carer said: 'Quality Foster Care are very good about the matching. They are careful and thoughtful. They

do not put us under any pressure.' As a result there are very good levels of placement stability and placement breakdowns are the exception.

Children thrive and flourish. Very well supported foster carers meet their physical and emotional needs. Reliable and consistent guidance from the agency helps them to welcome and integrate the children into their family network. The agency provides the scaffolding to ensure that carers understand their role and responsibilities. They aim to work collaboratively with stakeholders and agencies to prioritise the children's well-being, safety, education, health, and social needs. This results in many children achieving more than was expected in all aspects of their lives.

Experienced, knowledgeable, and skilled social workers carefully recruit, assess, and support foster carers from a range of diverse backgrounds. Foster carers feel valued and praise the staffs' collective approach to their day to day support. More than one carer said: 'Quality Foster Care provide very good support, regular supervision and a good variety of training.'

Two of the three founders remain involved working in, and shaping the service. They use their extensive knowledge and experience having been birth children of foster carers, to make life changing differences to children's lives. They share a steadfast dedication to participation. They work shoulder to shoulder with the registered manager and staff team to ensure that children have good experiences and receive the very best quality of care.

The agency has met in full the two recommendation made at the last inspection. This inspection raises no regulatory shortfalls, however, identifies three areas for improvement. These relate to education, assessment of risk and agency policy for parent and child placements.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (NMS 4.5)

Ensure the written education policy promotes and values children's education and is understood by foster carers with specific reference to holidays during school term. (NMS 8.5)

Ensure all staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS, with specific reference to the agency policy and procedures for making parent and child placements. (NMS 25.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children blossom. They have opportunities to experience appropriate excitement from events such as holidays abroad, driving lessons, day trips, and sleepovers with friends. One child said: 'I had never been on an aeroplane before I came to live here.' They take part in a range of fun activities such as swimming, brownies, basketball, and drama. This promotes a healthy lifestyle and equips children with lasting skills.

The routine and boundaries of a stable family environment helps them to change their behaviour while increasing their self-worth. One child said: 'Before I came here I was out on the street drinking and putting myself in dangerous situations. I'm not doing that now because I know what the rules are and what I need to do to get to school. My carer puts boundaries in for me and more than that she cares that I stick to them and do well.'

A number of children live with siblings. This places value on the significance of life time relationships and helps children to maintain their culture and family identity. Where children live separately from siblings they receive practical and emotional support to preserve and continue relationships, where assessed through care planning and review to be in their best interests.

Carers offer acceptance. They understand that meaningful change takes time. As a result incidents of concern reduce because children feel valued and learn new ways to manage difficult feelings. One agency said: 'Since moving there have been improvements in both behaviour and at school. The children benefit from the stability of this comfortable placement.' When care planning identifies that children would benefit from additional external help the agency supports referrals to services such as CAMHS. In addition they have recently employed the services of a psychologist who is available to work directly with carers, staff, and children in developing awareness of the impact of childhood trauma.

Children of school age make progress in education. One child said: 'We get to go to clubs and since I have been in care I have got a lot smarter.' Attendance exceeds 98%. Each has a Personal Education plan. They receive help with homework and where agencies identify additional support, receive tutoring in the foster home. Many young people exceed expectations from their starting points. For example; going to university, college, achieving GCSE's.

As children reach the age for leaving care, the agency is experiencing an increase in the number of continuations of placement and 'staying put' arrangements. One parent of a child looked after said in a recent survey: 'I think that there has been a really good job done with placing my son as he is very happy, well loved, and cared for. I feel and I know that he has a great life ahead of him.'

Children participate in their carer's annual foster home review as a matter of routine.

This provides a scheduled route for them to make known their views about their experiences. The agency also has a children's participation group. Representatives from that group have had involvement in revising the current colourful edition of the children's guide. The guide helps children coming into placement to know what to expect from this agency, how to complain, and how to seek help if needed away from the foster family. The services of an adult mentor with direct experience of social care, provides an additional alternative route for any child in the agency requiring time to process their views, and wishes.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

To date the vast majority of carers live within Essex. They are within easy reach of the office base. While the agency places adverts, the most successful method for selection and recruitment is word of mouth. They accept applications from households reflecting diverse sections of society enabling them to endeavour to meet the range of needs represented from the referrals received by local authorities.

Experienced social workers, well informed about fostering, engage in thorough comprehensive assessments of prospective carers and their support networks. They deliver a structured pre-approval training programme which includes input from current foster carers and looked after children. The complete process is robust. It is designed to ensure that those who have sufficiently demonstrated suitability to understand the impact of loss, to care for children with challenging behaviours and complex social backgrounds receive recommendation for approval to the fostering panel.

Membership of the foster panel reflects significant professional knowledge and personal experience of the social care spectrum. Well written minutes evidence a thoughtful, organised, and vigorous process. They provide critical consideration of the cases presented and make complete recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker. The rationale for decisions to approve or re-approve are clear. The result is a thorough and comprehensive approach to the pre-approval and re-approval process. This helps to ensure that carers understand the range of placements the agency will consider them for.

This inspection identified that one approved household continued looking after an emergency parent and child placement when not approved for this range. This means that on this occasion the managers did not follow their own policy or ensure that this fostering activity consistently reflected regulation and national minimum standards. This inspection notes that there was no direct impact for the placement because the parent said: 'When I came I didn't have a good attachment with my child but the carers have helped me to build this. They have taught me how to play, to put in a routine, and to stick to it.' None the less, this one example of making and maintaining a placement out of approval range represents a shortfall in standards.

Social workers carrying out the initial assessments often go on to support and supervise the approved carers. They take time to gather and share all available information to give to the potential carer. They arrange introductory meetings with other professionals and pre placement visits for the children wherever this is possible. This helps children to feel welcome and as a result placement breakdown is rare. The agency undertakes placement progress meetings which enable them to provide current placement information at statutory reviews. One independent reviewing officer told the agency: 'The carers are brilliant and their love and support has, in no small way contributed to the child's success.'

Foster carers receive monthly recorded supervision. In addition the workers make themselves available to fostering households when needed. One carer said: 'When I first started I was on the phone a lot, sometimes every day, they were so patient with me and guided me through what needed to be done.' The small team of qualified supervising social workers deliver support to assist carers in remaining focused on the experiences of the child. They track the progress made and proactively share the information with placing authorities. One representative said: 'This local authority is about to write to the agency to thank them and the carers for going above and beyond to support the children in placement.'

The registered manager and supervising social workers deliver the out of hour's service. More than one carer spoken to said: 'There is always someone available. Every member of the team knows each carer and child.' This gives carers confidence and helps them to feel supported.

A well organised and considered approach to training and professional growth led by the registered manager enables carers to complete training and the support and development standards, timeously. One carer said: 'I like that they are willing to recognise that different carers have different levels of training needs.' E learning, groups for men who foster, carer support groups, and external training means that there is a variety of opportunities for all members of the fostering household to access training and further their knowledge base. This helps foster carers to be resiliently prepared and ready to work through the impact of offering care and support to children with complex emotional needs.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children say confidently that they feel safe living with their foster families. They are able to identify individuals from within their network to make contact with should they need to share concerns or make complaint. They know the workers associated with the agency because they speak to them when they visit the foster home or see them at organised events. As a result they are confident that they know adults who

listen to children. For the children represented in this inspection, a number identified their foster carers or school teachers as their safe people.

This agency takes seriously allegations or suspicions of harm raised in relation to foster carers. Policies and procedures are clear. They share information timeously with relevant stakeholders, for example, the delegated officer for Essex. At the same time they source specialist external support for the fostering household. Where other agencies deem no further action necessary, they review approval and identify with the carers a plan to monitor and appraise performance. This helps to ensure that children live with adults who are willing to learn and know what to do to keep them safe from physical and psychological harm.

Policies and procedures make clear the expectations of carers and staff in working together to reduce the likelihood of incidents of missing. Regular meetings and liaison with others helps the agency with the collection, monitoring, and analyses of data. This helps them to understand the reasons behind children's actions enabling the foster carers and staff to work with police and placing social workers. They have shared their policy with authorities in the surrounding geographical location which helps towards keeping children safe in the wider community. One carer said: 'My child came with a history of going missing from other placements. So we talked about that and I explained why we needed to know where she was and what we would be doing if she left the house.' The result is, children build meaningful relationships with their carer's and in most cases incidents of missing reduce.

Each household recommended for approval to panel completes a generic 'safer care' policy. This document enables families to evidence the adjustments made to become a fostering household. Additionally, at the point of placement the agency requires that individual child safer care plans are completed. Designed to tease out the approach to promote a safe environment for the individual, the document helps carers and social workers to see at a glance the action required to minimise allegation or misinterpretation. The information in the assessments sampled for this inspection was inconsistent and not representative of the agency policy. As a result this represents a short fall of minimum standards.

Supervising social workers are in frequent regular contact with the members of the fostering household. The emphasis placed on safeguarding and child protection during recruitment, assessment, and supervision ensures that carers understand their role as part of the team around the child. Safeguarding is a mandatory training and refresher requirement of all foster carers. The agency undertakes unannounced visits aspiring to exceed minimum standards. One couple said: 'It is our responsibility to make sure that our young person is safe at all times and that means doing whatever it takes to make that happen.' One agency said: 'For Quality Foster care it is all about the children.'

The recruitment and vetting processes for staff and panel members are thorough and robust. Pre-employment checks and reference verification ensure that those working in the agency are appropriately trustworthy. Annual appraisals and good professional working practices across the agency help to ensure the continued suitability of those undertaking the range of roles across the service.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The registered manager has been in post for eight years. She is a qualified social worker and has significant relevant experience of social care and working with children and foster carers. The foster carers, their families, and children respect and value her work. Her professional and capable approach provides them with reassurance and confidence. She is dedicated to improving children's life opportunities. She recognises that a qualified and experienced team working alongside supported, committed carers means the agency is in a strong position to continue to deliver outstanding outcomes.

The agency has fully met the two recommendations from the last inspection.

Events routinely planned across the year enable looked after children, birth children, and carers to meet one another with the registered manager and the directors. The annual pantomime and adventure day alongside events such as raising money for local charities and competitions to design a Christmas card provide fun opportunities for children to engage with the agency. Written feedback to the agency from the birth child of carers is: 'Fostering has made me realise how lucky I am to have a family and to spend the entirety of my childhood with them.'

Two of the founders; the directors, are integral. They share the helm of this agency working closely with the registered manager to drive improvement. The directors shape plans for development and guide the strategic direction of the business. They have an appreciation of the daily challenges carers face. This inspires confidence in staff and carers. One carer said: 'It is good to know that both directors understand from experience the issues that we face.' This means that the leaders and managers are visible and make a positive impact.

Excellent local knowledge combined with good working relationships with placing authorities and other stakeholders enables the agency to understand the needs of the children referred. This in turn helps them to plan ahead and formulate policy addressing key issues such as child sexual exploitation and internet safety. An extensive range of well written policies provides additional guidance and direction for staff and carers. However, this inspection identified a shortfall in the agency education policy. It does not go far enough to make clear that children should not access holidays outside of school term dates.

The Agency Decision Maker is not involved in day-to-day operations. This provides objectivity in relation to the approval process. Since the last inspection, supervising social workers' caseloads remain low while the team expanded to reflect the steady growth in carer households. All staff benefit from consistent training and supervision appropriate to their respective role. The registered manager continues to receive

external professional supervision. This means that there is enduring commitment from the directors to invest in ensuring that the service remains comfortably resourced to deliver high quality services.

The statement of purpose is available on the website. It clearly sets out the aims, objectives, and ethos of the service providing local authorities, parents, and prospective carers with accurate information about the significant strengths of this agency.

A dependable approach to producing reports to meet the required regulatory reporting structure provides Ofsted with information about the service month to month. Reports of notifiable incidents clearly describe the event and action to address the issues. This means that internal systems are efficient and very well organised.

The comprehensive annual review, details the progress made across all facets of the service and includes the feedback from stakeholders, carers, and children. One child looked after said to the agency: 'I would like to leave my carers when I am 100 years old.'

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.