

Help me Grow Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Sharon Payne
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Provision subtype Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Help Me Grow is a privately owned independent fostering agency, registered in May 2014 . The agency aims to recruit, supervise and support foster carers in meeting the needs of children looked after by local authorities. It provides short-term, task-centred, sibling group, long-term and parent and child placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency has four children in placement and 10 fostering households.

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 within positive placements, matched to their cultural needs. They benefit from secure attachments and a sense of belonging, which increases their self-esteem and makes them aspirational about their future. The agency has the ethos of the African proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child'; this includes well-supported foster carers and an extremely responsive staff team who work in unity to meet children's needs and promote their welfare. Children are achieving academically and benefiting from good health outcomes, which positively impacts their well-being.

The agency has highly experienced foster carers who are able to meet children's complex needs. The extensive range of training gives foster carers the confidence to fulfil their role. There are plans to recruit a wider range of carers to meet the needs of parent and child, remand and mainstream placements. The agency proactively supports placements through dedicated respite carers and befrienders for children. Children benefit from a strong, challenging fostering panel, who ensure that the agency is providing the best possible care. The agency completes foster carer

assessments and approves prospective foster carers in a timely manner.

Children state that their foster carers help them feel 'safe, calm and comfortable'. Foster carers and staff receive extensive training on safeguarding issues, including gangs and child sexual exploitation. The agency has a proactive approach to safeguarding, which involves a wide range of practical support. The agency is also very responsive to incidents involving the challenging behaviour of children. Their behaviour is improving due to the consistent application of meaningful sanctions and rewards. Foster carers demonstrate a good awareness of youth culture and social media, which is extremely helpful when children are missing from care.

Children receive care from an agency which has strong leadership and management arrangements. The responsible individual and Registered Manager are both qualified social workers with significant experience within the fostering field. The responsible individual is also the owner of a residential family centre and accredited contact centre. The former enables the fostering agency to access the expertise needed for parent and child placements. Foster carers and staff feel well supported by the agency both personally and professionally. Relationships with partner organisations are highly effective and contribute to the good outcomes for children.

Shortfalls within the agency are minimal considering they have only been in operation since May 2014. The children's guide and foster carer agreements do not meet regulations and standards. These omissions do not have an impact on the overall quality of care.

Recommendations focus on further improving the service; these relate to involving children and those significant to them in the monitoring and development of the agency. Children would also benefit from a wider implementation of the risk assessment system.

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 the children's guide includes the agency's complaint procedure and Ofsted's email and postal address (Regulation 3 (3))	01/11/2015
ensure the foster carer agreement refers to Ofsted, as the regulatory body for the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 27 (5) (b))	01/10/2015

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account when developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)

implement risk assessments for all children (NMS 4.5)

include details of the Children's Commissioners details in the Children's Guide (NMS 16.4)

take into account children's views during staff appraisals (NMS 24.6)

ensure all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations, in particular Regulation 35 consulting with placing authorities. (NMS 25.3)

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

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Children are happy, scoring their experience of foster care, as being '10 out of 10'. They feel 'loved', 'valued' and 'cared for'. They feel 'part of something, a family, that you're not alone and by yourself'. Social workers confirm that foster carers are 'very caring and loving and the child is treated the same as their own child'. Children benefit from stability, increased self-esteem and changed aspirations. They develop secure attachments within positive placements which are matched to their cultural needs. This helps in strengthening their identity. Children are warmly welcomed into the foster carer's immediate and extended family. They enjoy going to birthday celebrations and weddings and on international holidays, enabling them to connect to their heritage.

Placing authorities highlight that foster carers 'advocate well' and are 'proactive in finding ways to meet' children's needs. This results in specific children getting into outstanding schools and receiving specialist health assessments where required. Where appropriate, foster carers support children to practice their faith, through reading their holy books, praying and following dietary requirements. Children receive assistance with life story work, enabling them to understand their backgrounds, unique importance and helping them to look positively towards their future. The agency also helps with wider issues effecting children, for example support with their immigration status where appropriate.

Children highlight that they aspire to 'become well educated'. They are achieving academically. Reading forms part of younger children's daily routines. Foster carers say that the Registered Manager encourages children 'to push themselves to achieve, to their highest potential'. All children attend school and have good attendance; older children are attending college. Placing authorities state foster carers 'provide support with homework as well as additional educational activities'.

Children benefit from foster carers who support them practically in the classroom, if they are unable to settle, and on school trips. Foster carers stay in frequent contact with school staff regarding the child's progress. Foster carers and agency staff, regularly attend education-related meetings, promoting children's best interests. Children appreciate that their foster carers 'work with you' and the agency's supervising social worker 'encourages you' to achieve their goals.

Children report that they receive encouragement to try new things. They highlight that certain new experiences have been the 'best thing' they had ever done. Children are able to socialise together on agency outings. They enjoy a broad range of social, educational, recreational and where appropriate, spiritual opportunities. Children are learning musical instruments, martial arts and gymnastics. They express their creativity through arts and crafts. After-school and youth clubs, provide an opportunity to socialise with their peers. They also expand their knowledge by visiting museums and going to the theatre.

Children receive good health services, which effectively meet their emotional, physical and psychological needs. Where appropriate they benefit from child and adolescent mental health services, which assist in managing their behaviour and feelings. Therapeutic intervention includes play therapy and whole family counselling, involving the fostering household. Foster carers escort children to their general health and specialist appointments. Children receive practical support to maintain a healthy weight and lifestyle, with foster carers ensuring they eat balanced diets.

Children receive support to keep in touch with their family and friends, where appropriate. Foster carers are respectful of birth families. Placing authorities say that foster carers 'ensure that they speak about the child's family in a positive light'. They know the importance of maintaining a bond with relatives, understanding the link to a child's identity, particularly when visits have a negative impact on children's behaviour. Children see their family and friends at their foster carer's homes or in the wider community. They also enjoy trips out together and overnight stays.

Children are taught the necessary skills to take them into adulthood. Some develop their interpersonal skills through citizenship programmes. Some also participate in seasonal work which introduces them to the world of work. Children learn social skills and good manners, which enables them to interact and behave appropriately. Depending on their age, their household routines include cleaning their rooms, doing their laundry and preparing snacks, hot drinks or meals. Children learn the importance of budgeting and saving; they proudly buy personal items as a result of their own efforts.

Foster carers are currently purchasing items for older children to take with them when they move into their independent accommodation. This is from their fostering allowance and not a leaving care budget. Children are able to stay with their foster carers, as long as needed. There are past examples of children staying well into adulthood, without financial assistance to the carers. They continue to maintain links attending former foster children's weddings, graduation ceremonies and being a godparent to their children. Social workers highlight that foster carers are making a 'big difference' in the children's lives, commenting on the 'loving and nurturing care' children receive.

Children have an opportunity to feedback their views during their carer's supervisory visits and at foster carer reviews. Children benefit from their newsletter, which regularly informs them of developments within the agency. The newsletter also has photographs of all staff, which helps children to familiarise themselves with them. The agency is planning to introduce support groups and forums, within the next year to formalise the consultation process. This will enable children to be more influential within the agency's development and strategic thinking.

Quality of service

Judgement **Good**

Children say that their foster carers are doing 'a fantastic job'. They grade the agency a 'B' and their foster carer receives an 'A'. One social worker highlights that 'this is one of the best placements' they have. They attribute this to the 'well supported and experienced carers'. The agency has highly experienced foster carers, who are able to meet children's complex needs. They demonstrate a strong commitment to their role. There are plans to recruit a wider range of carers commencing in the next month, to meet the needs of parent and child, remand and mainstream placements.

Some placing authorities comment on the 'excellent match' between children and their foster carers. Foster carers highlight that the agency 'is good as putting all the cards on the table and tell them how it is'. Placing authorities say that they like foster carer's profiles. These provide a good overview of carer's strengths, interests and their home; photographs make the information more real. Foster carers have a signed agreement with the agency. There is an oversight regarding reference to the regulatory body, as it still refers to the Commission of Social Care Inspection rather than Ofsted. This information does not have an impact on the quality of care; however, the placement agreement must meet regulatory requirements.

Foster carers speak of the agency's ability to support them professionally and personally. They state that 'the support is outstanding and the training provided is excellent'. The extensive range of training gives foster carers the confidence to fulfil their role. They benefit from the flexible nature of online training, which they find 'very informative'. They are completing their training, support and development standards within the required timescale. They appreciate the fact that they 'are developing as a professional' and are part of the 'team around the child'.

Foster carers receive ongoing professional development, which addresses their weaknesses. Constructive criticism enables them to fulfil their potential as carers. They describe this as giving them the 'confidence to care'. They report that 'the fostering role would almost be impossible if there was not someone from the team in your corner'. Emotional support is only a telephone call away and this includes evenings, nights and weekends. One-to-one meetings at their home occur every month and they receive regular telephone calls and texts.

The agency proactively supports placements through dedicated respite carers and befrienders. Back-up carers are primarily relatives, which provide a familiar face and good continuity of care for children. Support groups provide an opportunity for foster carers to share their experiences and encourage each other. They appreciate the fact that the responsible individual provides an appetising buffet of culturally reflective food during these meetings. The responsible individual purposefully uses the nurturing aspect of food to encourage the nurturing care of children.

Foster carers state that it is 'nice the agency thinks about us' and promotes 'a family atmosphere which is really good'. They enjoy seasonal meals out, seaside trips and fun days. The agency honours all household birthdays, which includes the carer's own children, who receive a voucher. The agency are also advocating for more delegated authority, to enable them to make more independent decisions regarding foster children's care.

The agency completes prospective foster carer's assessments within the eight month timescale. Assessments are improving and staff receive the relevant training. The foster panel highlight that the 'report matches the person'. The agency are currently undertaking a review to ensure assessment reports are more evidence based, incorporate safeguarding risks and clearly identify parenting skills. Assessor's supervision will also include greater reflection and analysis.

Children benefit from a strong, challenging fostering panel who ensure that the agency is providing the best possible care. The highly experienced panel chair has a good command of the task. The diverse panel members have a wide range of expertise, enabling them to make effective, child-focused decisions. The panel provides very constructive feedback, which positively contributes to the agency's improvement. The panel process runs smoothly and the agency decision maker approves all applicants within a timely manner. The agency provides each person on the central list with access to appropriate training. Appraisals will commence within the next two months.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Children state that their foster carers help them feel 'safe, calm and comfortable'. Social workers also confirm this, stating that foster carers 'have demonstrated the ability to provide a safe and secure environment'. Foster carers and staff receive extensive training on safeguarding issues. This includes advanced child protection, domestic and sexual violence, youth gangs, drugs and child sexual exploitation. Foster carers describe this training as being 'very enlightening', helping them to understand children's backgrounds and current dangers. The agency effectively manages child protection concerns. For example, they recently took prompt action when dealing with an abandoned child.

Foster carers express tremendous pride in their ability to maintain placements, which they describe as 'difficult'. A placing authority praises a foster carer's ability 'to develop the child's social skills by correction, guidance, advice and appropriate boundaries and discipline'. Leaders and managers explain that they want placements which have 'a family feel with clear boundaries'.

Foster carers benefit from training in conflict resolution, crisis intervention and managing challenging behaviour. Children's behaviour is improving due to the consistent application of meaningful sanctions and rewards. They learn to understand the consequences of their actions, which helps in their development of self-responsibility.

The agency is very responsive to incidents involving children's challenging

behaviour. This includes visiting homes, collecting children from school and using mediation and counselling skills to resolve issues. The recruitment and vetting of staff and panel members is thorough, complying with statutory requirements.

The agency has a proactive approach to safeguarding, which involves practical support. Where there have been sexual exploitation concerns, the provision of a befriender has helped in supporting young people to see the reality of their situation. All fostering households have a comprehensive safe caring policy. The agency rigorously monitors health and safety. Foster carers are aware of environmental risks. Written risk assessments are in place for cases where children are missing from care. The agency does not routinely complete these where children present with other issues, for example self-injurious behaviour. This would assist in identifying and taking action against the hazards, which may have an impact on a child.

The agency follows missing from care procedures and demonstrates cohesive interagency working. The Registered Manager offers to collect young people and bring them back to their foster carer's home. The Registered Manager also attends strategy meetings and works in partnership with the police, social workers and other involved agencies. Foster carers demonstrate a good awareness of youth culture and social media. This informs their communication with young people and the ability to trace their whereabouts when missing. Although missing from care, young people still call their foster carer daily and they maintain a good relationship. This includes engaging in family activities when they are at home. Foster carers have a significant understanding of young people and they tenaciously endeavour to steer them in 'the right direction'.

Leadership and management

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Children receive care from an agency which has strong leadership and management arrangements. A placing authority says they are 'very impressed' and think it is a 'very good agency'. Foster carers feel the agency is 'outstanding' as it 'is about the child, not bureaucracy'. The agency had effective links with a range of local authorities in London and the home counties. The agency is registered with the regional care placement agency, which enables their service to reach a wider range of authorities. A placing authority comments on the 'excellent communication' they share with the agency. Leaders and managers also have links with establishments and groups within the local community, which assists with developing their service to children. This includes a local school and youth group,

Leadership of the agency is visible and highly effective. The responsible individual has a good understanding of fostering, having been a foster carer and an independent panel chair. The responsible individual undertakes unannounced visits

to foster homes, providing senior management oversight. The responsible individual also leads on quality assurance. A professional says that leaders and managers 'are passionate about getting it right for the children'.

The Registered Manager has over twenty years' experience within fostering services. They have previously run their own fostering agency, managed other agencies and set up a remand fostering service. Their extensive management experience includes overseeing children's homes, leaving care and supported housing services. Long-standing foster carers demonstrate an unprecedented loyalty to the Registered Manager with some following him from two other agencies. They state this is due to this individual providing them with 'good support'. Some children fondly refer to the Registered Manager as 'Uncle' and the foster carers state he is 'like a second Dad' to children. A placing authority comments on the Registered Manager 'having very good interpersonal skills' and they would recommend the agency to their colleagues.

The agency has a comprehensive statement of purpose, which is available on their informative website. This document details the agency's commitment to children and foster carers, including the foster carer charter. Children benefit from their own guide, which outlines what they can expect from the fostering agency. The children's guide contains a wide range of useful information and Ofsted's telephone number. A few items are missing as required in the regulations; these include the complaints procedure and Ofsted's email and postal address. Children are not given the Children's Commissioner details as another external resource.

Children receive tailored support from the staff team, which includes a qualified social worker and a social work assistant. Staff feel well supported by the agency both personally and professionally. They receive regular reflective supervision and benefit from an extensive range of training. The agency also assists in part-funding social work courses and travel costs. The Registered Manager undertakes staff appraisals, which effectively summarises their contribution and development plans for the future. Appraisals do not yet include children's input.

The agency has a robust quality assurance system, which involves regular management meetings and rigorous monitoring. Reports include some level of consultation from foster carers; feedback from placing authorities is limited although regulations require that quality of care reports should involve consultation with placing authorities. The agency has a clear vision for the future and plans to adopt a service-user involvement framework. Detailed reports evaluate the quality of care and highlight areas for further improvement, linking with the service development plan.

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.