

Archway Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC044415
Inspection date 13-16/10/2015
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Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This agency, which has a satellite office in Wisbech, became part of the National Fostering Agency (NFA) in March 2015. The NFA owns eight other fostering agencies throughout England and also operates fostering services in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The fostering service offers foster placements to children and young people on a planned or emergency basis, for short and long-term duration, for bridging and for respite care. The service also offers placements for sibling groups and for parents and their children.

At the time of this inspection the agency had approved 51 fostering households. The agency were supporting foster carers to look after 52 children and young people.

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 small agency, with an established management team, has retained a personal touch that foster carers and professionals appreciate; as one said, 'they know their carers'. Recruitment has been steady, maintaining the number of foster carers as some retire or move on. Preparation and assessment is thorough. Foster carers receive good support through regular supervision, training and forums that equip them for their role and ensure their voices are heard.

Matching is a strength of the agency, which enables children and young people to develop good relationships and secure attachments with their foster carers. This

provides a good foundation on which children and young people make good progress. Foster carers have a sound understanding of the range of safeguarding needs that the children and young people they care for may present. They advocate on their behalf to ensure that their needs are met by external professionals where this is necessary.

The registered manager is known to all the foster carers. She effectively leads the team in building and maintaining positive and beneficial relationships with partner agencies. A weakness in the management is the lack of formal quality assurance processes or written evaluation of the service. NFA are working with the registered manager to address this shortfall.

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
The registered person must maintain a system for improving the quality of care provided by the fostering agency and provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) (Regulation 35 (1)(b) and (2)).	15 December 2015

Recommendations

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

ensure that the panel plays an important quality assurance role, providing objectivity and having the ability to challenge practice; in particular review the role of the panel adviser (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services para 5.2)

review the training programme for foster carers to ensure they are fully equipped with the skills required of them by the fostering service in a timely manner (NMS 20.4)

ensure that where gaps are identified the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)

ensure records evidence fully how children's safety and welfare is promoted in all fostering placements, in particular specify the range of risks and the strategies to reduce these (NMS 4.1)

revise the foster carer's welcome booklet so that all enable a child or young person understand how they will be cared for. (NMS 11.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people feel part of the family they are living with. They are well cared for by their foster carers. They have developed or are developing secure attachments and feel safe and at home. One said, 'I like everything about living with L'. This enables some to move back to their families, others on to adoptive families and many to achieve permanence with their carers through long term placements and 'staying put arrangements' or legal measures such as adoption or special guardianship orders.

Children and young people are given welcome booklets about the family they are going to live with. These vary considerably in content. Some provide excellent information to enable a child or young person to understand how they will be cared for. Others are simply photographs of the house and carers which do little to allay any worries a child or young person may have on moving in with strangers.

Children and young people have a number of opportunities for activities inside and outside the home. These include judo, gym, football, scouts, brownies, horse-riding and art classes. Children and young people are developing a positive sense of self, with input from foster carers who know how important this is. Children and young people benefit from well-planned and structured contact with family members, supported by foster carers who manage this confidently when this is their responsibility.

Foster carers encourage children and young people to express their views and use these to inform their day-to-day care arrangements where possible. Children and young people share their concerns, confident that their foster carers will take action. Some children and young people are interested in and read their carers' recordings and make their own contribution. They know how to complain and have access to advocates and help line numbers in the children and young people's guides.

Most children and young people take responsibility for their behaviour. They know the benefits good behaviour can bring and the consequences of not doing the right thing. The few older young people who expose themselves to risk of child sexual exploitation or substance misuse are reducing these risks as the incidence of going out without permission or missing decreases.

Children and young people enjoy good health. Foster carers have a good understanding of the health needs of the children and young people they are looking after and ensure that these are met, working in partnership where necessary. A commissioner commented 'the foster carers had good training to equip them to care for a child with particular disabilities'.

Most children and young people are in full-time education. Those not in education are being actively engaged while a suitable education place is found. Foster carers have established positive links with schools that provides good support to the

children and young people enabling them to sustain school placements. Many have achieved good educational outcomes. This forms an element of the annual awards ceremony. The forthcoming celebration will see a young adult, who has just graduated with a first class degree, present prizes to children and young people supported by Archway carers, as he once was.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

There has been steady recruitment of foster carers since the last inspection, but a similar number of foster carers have left the agency resulting in a very small net increase. Local authority commissioners value the service the agency provides but would like them to be able to offer more placements. The agency has made a new appointment to the post of carer recruitment officer. The post holder is developing plans for a recruitment drive and will be supported by the wider national team of recruitment officers within NFA. This provides access to a range of resources and materials and opportunities for information sharing.

The agency has foster carers who can and do meet a wide range of complex needs. A commissioning officer from a local authority commented, 'they don't shy away from more challenging placements.' The agency provides foster carers with access to a clinical psychologist, determined by the needs of the child or young person. This has proved successful in providing foster carers with strategies to support the child and so maintain the placement.

The agency threads through all their work a consistent focus on the needs of children and young people. The skills to foster course is comprehensive and carers talk enthusiastically about what they learned and how valuable they found the experience. It is effective in ensuring that applicants have a good insight to the world of fostering to inform their decision about whether to progress their application or withdraw. Foster carers particularly liked the involvement of the whole family in the process, with a group for children of applicants to ask questions about what fostering might mean for them. Their children benefit from this opportunity to be part of the process. As a result fostering households have a sound understanding of their role, that of the supervising social worker and that of the other professionals working with them and the child they are caring for.

The vast majority of assessments are undertaken by independent social workers managed by a team leader for the agency. These are timely, thorough and of a good standard. Foster carers describe the process as 'a journey' and 'reflective, that prompted wider family discussion'. Assessments are presented to a well-established panel, led by a panel chair who has been in post for 10 years. The chair and the agency are mindful of the potential impact of their long standing relationship and strive to minimise this. The agency is looking to increase the membership of the central list of panel members to increase diversity and build on the current range of experience. Panel members have regular training and annual appraisals that equip

them to do their role. As a result of learning from recent external training the panel advisor has drawn up an action plan. There are minor shortfalls in panel processes for making recommendations to the decision maker. The structure of panel, in asking questions of the agency through the panel advisor before each case is presented, contributes to some blurring of the boundaries of the role. Not all cases presented to panel are subject to real challenge by them, for example an in-house assessment did not evidence that the applicants' motivation to foster had been fully explored and the panel did not pursue this aspect.

Foster carers are vocal in their praise of the support provided by all the agency staff. They really appreciate knowing who will pick up the phone when they call and are confident in the knowledge base of all staff both during and out of office hours. This is a significant benefit of being part of a small agency, a reason it was chosen by many of the carers. Supervising social workers visit fortnightly and this provides a sound platform for the development of positive relationships between the supervising social worker, the family and the children and young people being looked after. Unannounced visits take place at least twice a year. Foster carers describe training as effective and the majority engage well in the scheduled programme and are supported to attend external courses to meet specific needs. However the in-house programme does not routinely enable foster carers to access mandatory courses within the agency specified time frames, for example training in positive care and control. Some experienced foster carers say that the mandatory courses can feel repetitive, highlighting safeguarding in particular. Foster carers are well supported to achieve the training, support and development standards within a year of approval. Foster carer reviews, conducted by independent social workers, occur at least annually, more often if required, for example in response to standards of care concerns.

Matching is a strength of the agency, reflected in the stability of placements. A commissioner said 'The placements officer knows the foster carers well and makes good matches, five out of six are very settled'. A social worker observed 'I was initially curious about the match as it wasn't an obvious choice. The foster carers have delivered a level of support and stability that have enabled him to flourish'. Another described a young person as being 'well placed'. This detailed knowledge is not fully reflected in the supporting documents, in particular specifying how identified gaps are to be addressed.

Foster carers demonstrate positive engagement with children and young people that enables them to feel part of the family. There is good evidence that, where it is part of the care plan for the child or young person, foster carers make good relationships with those important to them. Any short breaks in caring focus on how this in the child or young person's best interests, and are predominantly used to secure the stability of the placements.

Where possible there are close working relationships between foster carers and the established social worker for the children and young people. Where there have been frequent changes of social worker the carers have liaised to good effect with the

independent reviewing officer (IRO) for the child or young person. Foster carers are actively involved in planning for and with the child or young person in their care and demonstrate a sound commitment to them. Generally foster carers feel their views are listened to.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Safeguarding is a consistent theme in the work of the agency. As a result the vast majority of children and young people feel safe and are safe. There are a very small minority who continue to put themselves at risk, but these risks are reducing.

Foster carers fully consider the age and ability of the children and young people they are caring for when making decisions about risks that children and young people may take. This creates opportunities for personal development. Children and young people are given accessible information on how to complain and there are a number of adults they could go to with any concerns or worries. Supervising social workers ensure that they regularly see children and young people on their own and a number have advocates. This enables supervising social workers to share emerging issues for individual children and young people. They may use common themes to arrange groups on specific topics, for example sexual health, which is facilitated by external speakers.

The way that foster carers apply their knowledge effectively safeguards children and young people. An IRO observed that the carer is a 'major safeguard' in the young person's life. A social worker said of a carer 'She goes beyond what is expected to support him.' Foster carers are knowledgeable about the specific risks to individuals and take the action required but these are not reflected in the written risk assessments. These are broad brush and lack detail on the separate risks and the strategies to be used to reduce them. Supervising social workers are knowledgeable about the risks and evaluate practice in supervision. This is not routinely captured in the records. The agency implements good systems for sharing incidents and concerns with placing authorities, offering challenge where necessary. Foster carers' training in child sexual exploitation and radicalisation has raised their awareness and informed their actions. They also have a good understanding of the protocols that apply when children or young people are missing. Foster carers confirm that return home interviews take place but the agency is not robust in their recording of these or the actions taken in response to any episodes of missing.

Foster carers are knowledgeable about the impact of abuse and understand the behaviour of children and young people in this context. They know what to do and who to contact in the event of a disclosure by a child or young person. The agency has increased the frequency of safeguarding training in response to a monitoring visit in August 2015, although foster carers commented that this could 'be livened up' to keep it 'fresh'.

Recruitment procedures and checks are robust, so that suitable people are employed by and contracted to work for the agency.

This well-established agency has good relationships with other professionals. Staff model an open and sharing culture. Staff and foster carers know how to express concerns about practice and the agency respond's appropriately. Allegations about poor practice are well managed and there is effective consultation with the local authority safeguarding personnel. One described the service as, 'working in a multi-agency way to put safeguards in place. They co-operate fully and put the needs of the child first.'

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The long standing manager and senior staff have built effective relationships with a range of professionals. Commissioners highly recommend the agency and say that they talk to the placements officer regularly about the needs of children that they are looking to place. One commissioner said, 'if a social worker has more questions we link with the placements officer, she will find out the answers and respond promptly. For a small agency they are one of my favourites, we get a very good service from them.'

Children and young people are supported to engage in a range of activities, both after school and in the local community. The team hold a weekly meeting to ensure that all staff are knowledgeable about the children and young people placed and their current situation. This includes reflection on progress and the areas for development. Supervising social workers support foster carers to take action to address the emerging needs of children and young people.

The manager monitors monthly the matters required by regulation and holds quarterly practice meetings to discuss emerging themes and trends. Although there is a development plan there is a lack of formal written review or evaluation of the quality of the agency.

The statement of purpose has been updated to reflect the acquisition by NFA. The information in this and the children's guide is easily accessible. Staff implement in practice the aims and objectives of the service so these are recognised by children and young people and those who work with the agency. Staff value their foster carers and actively seek their views through the regular forum. There have been no recent complaints. Foster carers express the view that staff listen and take action in response to what they are told so they have no need to complain.

This is a well-resourced agency with good staffing levels that effectively support the social work task. Those who work for the agency have a strong commitment to ensuring that children and young people placed are very well cared for. All social work staff are appropriately qualified and have relevant fostering experience. For some this is solely within this agency as they enjoyed their placement as student

social workers. The manager supports staff in their professional development, there is a strong commitment to both newly qualified and experienced staff. Staff receive regular supervision and can outline how this informs their supervision of foster carers to good effect, through the use for reflection on different strategies for behaviour management for example. Staff benefit from regular, relevant training, some of which is joint training with foster carers both in-house and external courses. This shared experience is valuable and confirms foster carers as part of the team working with the child or young person. All staff have had appraisals in the past year and 360 degree appraisals are about to be introduced to include the views of children, young people and foster carers.

Notifications have been made as required. The manager can evidence the action taken following these incidents.

The manager has addressed the shortfalls identified at last inspection and the actions required following the monitoring visit in August 2015. In particular, professional development plans and training schedules for foster carers are subject to greater scrutiny and full evaluation as part of their annual review, as are any standards of care concerns.

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.