

Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The head office of Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Limited is in Sittingbourne, Kent. This privately owned independent fostering agency also operates a sub-office in Hertfordshire with home based workers supporting carers in London and Essex. At the point of this inspection, 57 fostering households were approved, with 84 children and young people in placement. The service provides foster placements for assessment, support, respite and rehabilitation, as well as emergency, short, medium and long-term care for children. The service also provides parent and child 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: **Requires improvement**

Leadership and management of the agency requires improvement because management of the service lacks rigour. Some staff are unclear regarding the accountability of roles which dilutes the management oversight of the agency. While actions were being taken to address these shortfalls and to limit the negative impact they have had on children and young people's welfare these have not had time to be embedded.

The management of safeguarding is ineffective. Staff do not always follow up actions or record them. Documents often lack the recording of the decision making process and the date of the decision or review timescale. Key members of staff do not have suitable safeguarding training commensurate to their responsibilities. Staff who have champion roles in areas such as missing from home, radicalisation and sexual

exploitation do not have the skills, experience and authority to be effective.

Safeguarding of children and young people who go missing needs improvement via the consistent provision of return home interviews. The agency's records and risk assessments do not consistently demonstrate the strategies used to minimise risks and consequent improvements. In addition, incomplete records in respect of the individual approaches of methods of control, discipline and restraint means that any potential patterns or trends risk being missed. This prevents appropriate remedial action from being taken or any progress being identified.

Assessments regarding the suitability of prospective foster carers sent to panel are not consistently analytical. One example did not include all of the necessary information when presented at panel. This resulted in the agency breaching a previous requirement set although the carer was not approved.

Children and young people live in stable placements with foster carers that are committed to them. During 2014 to 2015 there were only eight unplanned endings. Foster carers work effectively with social workers and other professionals such as therapists and the agency's staff in the team around the child. One partnership agency stated 'cannot commend these foster carers highly enough. They go well above and beyond. The positive impact they have had on the children cannot be underestimated'.

Children and young people individually make good progress in relation to their health, education and well-being. Care practice promotes education attendance. Strong relationships develop between children, young people and their foster carers. The children spoken to say they are happy living with their foster carers and they felt part of the family. One child said 'it's really fun here; I get what I need here which is new to me.' Another child states that the best things about living with their foster carer were 'my bed, toys, go-kart, bike, d.s., Easter eggs, going on the steam train, and meatballs with pasta.'

Foster carers recruited by this agency provide caring and nurturing environments that are conducive to meeting the emotional and health care needs of the children and young people living with them.

A clear strength of the agency is seeking the views of children and young people. Mechanisms are in place to listen to their wishes and feelings and these have influenced decision-making. There are innovative practices which impact on agency developments and strategic thinking, such as youth participation forums, young people being actively involved in the recruiting of the fostering manager and inclusive events and newsletters. Some panel members have personal experience of being in care. This strengthens the voice of the child in care within the agency.

Children and young people feel safe and protected by foster carers who have their best interests at heart. One young person said that 'my foster carers help me keep out of trouble, never leave me out and they understand teenagers'. Staff work well in partnership with other agencies to keep children and young people safe. However, a lack of robust challenge of the deficiency in some placing authority social workers

practice fails to ensure the relationships are as effective as they could be.

Foster carers are considered an integral part of the fostering team and their views and opinions are valued. One foster carer stated that 'the agency is a family that encourages its foster carers to be the best. Our supervising social worker is incredible'. The agency, through having some long serving staff, provides a sense of stability for the foster carers

The agency has met previous recommendations to improve foster carers' training to meet the Training, Support and Development Standards. Some foster carers still lack training in areas such as 'gang awareness' and it is a requirement that this is provided. Supervision records for foster carers do not consistently demonstrate the level of support they require, the on-going assessment of their performance or tracking the tasks and areas that they are accountable for.

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 fostering service provider must obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family, and any other information they consider relevant, (Regulation 26 (2) (a))	30/12/2015
The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to— (a)the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and (b)the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill (Regulation 8(1) (a) (b))	30/01/2016
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support	30/12/2015

<p>outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. In particular, by ensuring that records of supervision sessions demonstrate the level of support, assess the foster parent's performance and accountability as well as their development. Additionally, by providing training in gang awareness and self-harm. (Regulation 17 (1))</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to—</p> <p>(a) the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose and the number and needs of the children placed by it. In particular, regarding any delegated accountability given to staff such as being a specialist champion in sexual exploitation, radicalisation or missing from home. (Regulation 19 (a))</p>	<p>30/01/2016</p>
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for (a) monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and (b) improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35 (1) (a) (b))</p>	<p>30/12/2015</p>

Recommendations

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

ensure that where a child goes missing, the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and responsible authority to consider reasons for their going missing. The fostering service considers with the responsible authority and foster carer what action should be taken to prevent the child going missing in the future (NMS 5.9)

implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment on matters including any safeguarding concern and behaviour management. In particular, ensure that risks are identified along with preventative and reactionary strategies with review dates (NMS 4.5)

ensure all staff from the agency works effectively in partnerships with other agencies concerned with safeguarding, by chasing and challenging where necessary the sharing of information and concerns (NMS 4.7)

record the evaluation of unannounced visits to demonstrate that the foster home continues to meet the needs of foster children (NMS 10.5)

implement a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. In particular, ensuring information flows and that all paperwork is signed and dated by the author (NMS 26.2)

work with the responsible authority to ensure effective integration of information held in the agency's case files and those of the responsible authority. (NMS 26.8)

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

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Good planning prior to placement ensures that foster carers have sufficient information and an opportunity to consider placement requests. Children and young people are given information about their foster carers, how they will be cared for and their new home which helps them settle and reduces anxieties. Profiles of the foster families are presented in various formats including brightly coloured journals.

Children and young people benefit from nurturing homes where they thrive. The agency identified at the last inspection a high number of unplanned endings and so reviewed their training courses to include secure base theory and their practices to embed this. Placement breakdowns have now reduced which provides children and young people the opportunity to grow up in stable environment where possible.

The agency provide opportunities for children and young people to have well-matched respite placements. A new policy ensures successful matching and planning which enhances the effectiveness of respite care. Consistent use of carers enables children and young people to build and benefit from trusting relationships with their respite foster carers. One child said 'I know where I am going and its fun too.'

Children and young people are welcomed as part of the family and have opportunities to experience good-quality family life and positive parenting. They develop strong bonds with their foster carers and as a result show increased emotional resilience. An Independent Reviewing Officer states 'A family life has been forged for the child which is what he wanted and this has given him stability.' Children feel safe and are able to understand some of the risks they place themselves at; this helps them improve their personal safety. Some young people have been able to remain with foster carers' post-18 under the agency's continued care arrangements.

Children and young people engage in activities they enjoy including youth clubs, gymnastics, swimming, badminton, army cadets, basketball, horse riding and skiing. One child said that they most enjoyed 'going to the local park like other children do'. They are valued in the families and included in their activities and holidays.

Children and young people have opportunities to engage, and influence day-to-day decision-making. The agency acts upon children and young peoples' views and this has improved their experiences. Examples include the relaunch of age-targeted communications such as teen chat and thinking of personal ways for them to receive a welcome box.

Children and young people's health is promoted through foster carers having high

expectations of healthy living. Foster carers are trained to promote physical wellbeing and have an in-depth understanding of the needs and abilities of each young person. Consequently, young people are supported to learn and make good lifestyle choices. Examples are young people self-medicating, which one young person was extremely proud of. Foster carers can also draw on the agency to support and undertake sessions with the young people regarding emotional health. Examples were seen of children benefitting from work on building friendships and self-care skills.

The vast majority of children are making positive educational progress from their starting points. Most children and young people of school age are in full time education with a significant number achieving 100% attendance. They know that when key events happen, such as sports days, parents' evenings and prom, there will be someone there to support them. One Independent Reviewing Officer states 'the family have been proactive and very involved in a positive way to ensure progress in the young person's education and her emotional wellbeing'. Disruptions in schooling are addressed by foster carers and the use of some sessional support from the agency. The agency arranges award ceremonies and prizes for children and young people to acknowledge effort and learning achievements. One young person has been supported to attend university.

Children and young people receive support in line with their age and ability to prepare them for independence. They benefit from experiences including learning to cook and learning to be safe unsupervised out of the home. The agency supports seven young people aged 17 and five young people age 18. Foster carers are trained and equipped to support young people to obtain the necessary skills for independence.

Quality of service

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Placement matching systems are effective, ensuring children and young people are only placed where foster carers are able to meet their individual needs. Foster carers' state the agency does not put pressure on them to take placements. Placement breakdown's continue to reduce and has only occurred where children's or foster carers' safety is compromised. One young person and their foster carer made a video presentation of their first year in care highlighting the very good progress socially and emotionally the young person had made. The continuity of care that is experienced by the majority of children and young people helps them to achieve positive outcomes.

The agency is clear regarding its delegated authority policy. This enables the foster

carers to form and maintain positive working relationships with parents and other significant adults for the child or young person. Foster carers feel supported and are committed to the agency's belief of what a foster carer should offer. They have a positive view of the agency and feel listened to. They say that their training is of a good standard; that the agency's training programme gives them the tools to provide safe and appropriate support and care for children and young people.

The agency has made progress in supporting foster carers to complete their Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS), a recommendation of the previous inspection. The agency provides a variety of useful training which equips foster carers well to meet the needs of children. However, some foster carers and staff have not undertaken sufficient training in key areas, such as 'gang cultures' and self-harm. This means they may not be up-to-date with changes in statutory guidance and best practice.

All foster carers' view the agency's support positively. They participate in many social and fun events such as a yearly black tie ball. One foster carer stated that, 'birth children are invited to attend all suitable events and are very supported by the agency'. The agency shows significant commitment to arranging events to maximise opportunities for young people to form friendships and take part. These are available for all children and young people, foster carers and their birth children. These events support children and foster carers to widen friendships and networks. Birth children therefore feel included and know that the agency values their contribution.

Effective out of hours service give foster carers' confidence that there is always someone available to offer support and guidance. One foster carer states that 'the agency even responded to an issue I had on Christmas day'. Additionally the agency has a 'roaming' support worker to enhance the support available to foster carers. This has proved very successful in promoting stability.

Recruitment is targeted effectively to provide suitable and stable placements for children and young people. The agency recruits foster carers from diverse backgrounds; for example from minority communities and groups, single foster carers and care leavers.

Fostering staff do not robustly act to ensure placing authorities undertake their statutory duties, such as, providing children's care plans or agreeing risk assessments. The agency have an escalation process in place but this has not been effective. Staff however, advocate with local authorities on children and young people's behalf where they disclose concerns about issues, such as contact arrangements. For some this has resulted in more child focused arrangements.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement **Requires improvement**
outcome:

Children and young people are encouraged to take age appropriate risks and to learn how to protect themselves and make positive choices regarding their behaviour. Children and young people talk to their foster carers about their worries and concerns and receive the support that they need. Some risk assessments are in place regarding behaviour management techniques and are updated at children and young peoples' review meetings. However, comprehensive and evaluative risk assessment is not evident for some children and young people and where they exist they are not always robustly tracked. Elements not incorporated include self-medication.

The agency now provides managing challenging behaviour, first aid and safeguarding training to prospective foster carers. These are mandatory training sessions prospective foster carers are expected to complete before presentation to panel. Existing foster carers also complete these training courses. Although agency staff undertake unannounced visits to foster carers' home, the records do not evidence consistent tracking of medication, health and safety matters or whether the child was seen.

Foster carers understand the risks and vulnerabilities of young people who go missing and work closely with them to identify triggers. As one foster carer states 'we managed to reduce the risks by taking an interest in their whereabouts, making sure they had our contact details and that they had a phone. We also assured them that we would welcome them home'. Foster carers' practice have led to significant reduction in the number of young people going missing across the agency but recording in this area is inconsistent. Although supervising social workers monitor the strategies to reduce missing episodes the records fail to consistently demonstrate or evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Return visits for young people who go missing are inconsistent and there is no provision in place where local authorities fail to provide this service.

The Registered Manager had created champion roles for staff in sexual exploitation, radicalisation and going missing. However, not all the staff have the necessary training, skills and experience for the lead area allocated.

A review of safeguarding policies and procedures has resulted in clearer guidance. The agency has developed better links with external agencies to ensure more robust oversight of safeguarding referrals. Arrangements for follow up of referrals are taking shape although not yet fully embedded in practice. All safeguarding

allegations are now actioned effectively.

Children and young people are aware of their rights and understand how they can complain or make representations. No complaints were made since the last inspection visit to the agency.

Robust recruitment practices protect children and young people from unsuitable people gaining employment in the agency as either staff or panel members. All staff and panel members are subject to checks on their suitability which are in line with both regulatory and best practice guidance. However, for one member of consultancy staff one reference was missing but this was rectified during the course of the inspection.

Leadership and management

Judgement **Requires improvement**
outcome:

Leadership of the agency has been visible but not effective. The assessment and approval functions of the agency are not robust. The agency's decision maker is also the Registered Manager. There are no clear lines of accountability. Monitoring of children and young peoples' progress is inconsistent. Regular monitoring of the quality of service is in place but it fails to robustly evaluate the service to ensure it is improving the quality of the service.

The agency's records are unstructured, repetitive and often unevaluated due to dual electronic and paper system. Records need to be simplified to enable children and young people to see their own progress now and in the future. They also need to be consistently dated. The agency does not demonstrate how lessons learnt are used to improve practice.

The agency has ensured the vast majority of recommendations set at the last full inspection have been met. The agency have met five requirements from a recent monitoring visit by Ofsted regarding safeguarding training for the management, implementing the safeguarding policy, making chronologies of concerns and ensuring legal documents are maintained consistently. However, there has been a breach on two other requirements. These are regarding assessments of foster carers and the training, supervision and support for foster carers.

Youth participation workers have supported the review of the children's guide. This provides information to children and young people about what they can expect from living with a foster family as well as information about the agency including how to make a complaint.

Foster carer assessment reports are not always appropriately managed. For example, a report went to panel without full and satisfactory information to determine the prospective foster carer's suitability, including the applicant's DBS. The panel did not recommend this applicant for approval. The agency appointed two foster parent ambassadors who started in April 2014 to support foster carers through investigation and recruitment events. Foster carers have free access to independent information, advice and support, and also external professional expertise, such as legal advice through the Fostering Network. Foster carers, children and young people have all stated that the support they receive is 'second to none'. Foster carers are seen as professionals not only by the agency, but also by other professionals working with the child or young person.

The agency is financially viable with clear oversight from the business manager who has a NVQ Level 7 in Strategic Leadership and Management. Staff supervision takes place monthly. Supervision records are variable; some are in-depth, reflective and with required actions clearly recorded. Other records lack detail and action planning, with handwritten records limiting recording clarity. Appraisals are annual and within timescale. These include young people's views.

The office premises are fit for purpose with sufficient space for staff, meetings and training rooms. There is also a contact room for birth parents to meet with their children. The electronically held information and paper files are appropriately secure.

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.