

Community Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC387213
Inspection date	19/10/2015
Inspector	Ceri Evans
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	19/07/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is registered as a charity and is a 'not for profit' limited company. The agency has another registered office in the South West. Its main function are to undertake recruitment, assessment and training to foster carers and to provide care and support to children and young people. At the time of the inspection there were fourteen children and young people in placement with sixteen approved 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**

This agency has been operating since 2009. It is a well-managed agency and carers feel they receive a good level of support. Managers provide strong leadership, clear direction and good support to staff. The Registered Manager is committed to high standards and to improve the service. This approach motivates the staff team and ensures that children and young people receive high standards of care that makes a measurable difference to their lives.

Stability of placements is a strength of the agency. Placements are supported well and this minimises disruptions. One young person said: 'I like it here, I'm really happy and I feel safe. It's much better than the other places I've in.'

The majority of children and young people thrive during their placements. Foster carers provide nurturing environments where children and young people feel welcomed, valued and 'part of the family'. Day to day practice is very child focused

and the team do their utmost to ensure that children and young people are safe, happy and settled. There is no doubt that staff and carers alike have strong aspirations for all children and young people, and are highly committed to ensuring they are effectively supported in order to meet their full potential.

Foster carers spoken with during the inspection say they feel valued and part of a team around the child. They have regular supervision and support visits from an appropriately qualified Social Worker. Foster carer reviews are carried out annually and unannounced visits take place twice a year. These mechanisms provide an appropriate degree of both challenge and support to ensure carers are working safely in the best interests of the children in their care.

Young people are consulted about their wishes and feelings. This includes contributions to their carer's reviews, involvement in participation groups and more recently, young people took part in an activity to redesign the children's guide for the agency. Carers also say they feel they are fully involved in future developments. They say that communication is good and that they feel listened to. For example, their views about training have been incorporated into the training and support group programme.

The shortfalls identified at this inspection mainly relate to administration processes and are not detrimental to the welfare and well-being of children and young people. The good practice recommendations relate to supervision and appraisals of staff, recruitment records and the development of clear systems to monitor the progress young people have made from the start of their placement.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

The fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service which includes: at least two references, preferably one from a current employer, and where possible a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children (NMS 19.3 d)

A written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)

All staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any

views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)

There are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This specifically relates to having a robust systems to assess and evaluate the progress children make from the start of their placement. (NMS 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Placements of children and young people are made following careful consideration and effective matching by the agency. This means that placements are generally stable. That said, the agency did report that they had some disruptions this year. However, subsequent moves were not undertaken in an emergency. They were well managed, with young people receiving effective support from their carers and staff. One placing authority commissioning manager stated: 'we have a number of children placed with community foster carer and I have only ever received compliments about the stability of the placements. The agency has good, open and honest dialogue with the authority and we are very happy with the service they provide.'

Transitions are carefully planned and where possible, children and young people have access to a child-friendly profile of the foster family prior to moving in. Carers also demonstrate a good understanding of the importance of a good transition to their homes. For example, more often than not children are able to visit the foster family before they move. This helps prepare them and alleviates any concerns or worries they had.

Children and young people's life chances have been significantly enhanced due to the care and support they receive from committed, skilled and nurturing foster carers. Their safety and welfare is central to the childcare practices and young people spoken with say they feel happy, settled and safe. Evidence gathered at this inspection clearly highlights that children and young people are cared for very well and their needs are fully met by their carers, with additional support when necessary. As a result, they feel safe, happy and develop very positive attachments with their fostering family. One young person stated 'I like it here because I've got a good relationship with (carers name), we've got a mother daughter type of a relationship she helps me in lots of ways, I feel very happy here.'

Education outcomes for children and young people placed with the agency are positive. Foster carers are good at supporting young people to attend school, although this may be some distance from their home. This provides continuity for young people. Some young people have made very good progress educationally, as a result of their stability and support, achieving good grades in national qualifications. Young people are supported into higher education or skills based further education courses. This ensures that young people are able to fulfil their potential and have the opportunity to enter the work place with nationally recognised qualifications.

Health care is supported well. Carers ensure that children and young people attend health appointments and healthy lifestyles are actively promoted. This includes encouragement to choose healthy food options, to access leisure and recreational activities and an understanding of the importance of positive health promotion. As a

result young people have overall improved health care outcomes.

Children and young people have excellent opportunities to enjoy leisure time in their local communities. Their hobbies and interests are recognised and supported by their foster carers. Activities, such as day trips to interesting places, play sessions, arts and crafts and celebrations all encourage children and young people's participation and socialisation. Carers do their utmost to ensure that young people have every opportunity to partake in activities that they are interested in. This has helped children and young people to gain confidence in their abilities, have fun, acquire new skills and enjoy improved social and emotional skills.

The importance of supporting contact is fully endorsed by the agency. Children and young people benefit from regular contact with family and friends. Foster carers have good communication with birth families to ensure that children and young people develop and sustain relationships with those who are important to them. A social worker stated that: 'The carers have been supportive of (child's name) relationship with his parents. They have maintained a positive focus on him being rehabilitated there and there is good communication between the carers and his parents. I note that in the communication I have had with (child's name) parents they are very positive about the care their son receives.' This clearly demonstrated that contact is well managed and supported which impacts positively on children and young people's sense of belonging and personal identity.

Consultation with children and young people is a key strength of the agency. They are consulted on a regular basis and are active participants in young people's forums facilitated by staff. Young people have met with the Responsible Individual, the Register Manager and the Panel Chair to share their views about the service. Their suggestions have been taken seriously and acted upon. For example, young people recently devised a list of questions to ask perspective carers at the fostering panel. This shows that their views are respected and listened to which impacts positively on their feelings of self-worth and confidence. Other methods of consultation includes, foster carer reviews, participation at social events and discussions with social workers and placement support workers during support visits and supervision. All of which promote inclusion and active participation.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency offers children and young people a good quality service. They have a range of children's and young people placed with them from babies to adolescents. Some carers are approved for more than one child. Therefore, where possible the agency try to ensure that siblings can remain together. This helps children and young people to maintain family bonds with their brothers or sisters.

Although the agency has a relatively small number of fostering households, they have a clear and targeted recruitment strategy which is intended to attract a broad range of foster carers who can specifically meet the demands for more teenage and sibling

group placements. Good partnerships within the local community, targeted advertising and the recent development of social media have helped create some interest. The current recruitment strategy includes developing collaborative partnerships with other agencies and local authorities in order to increase placement capacity. These partnerships will help increase the agency's 'visibility' within the sector and ensure that a wide range of suitable placements are available for children and young people.

All fostering applicants are subject to robust vetting. This ensures that they fully understand the fostering task and what will be required of them. All initial home visits of potential foster carers are undertaken by a qualified social worker and the agency is very clear about the process from the start. Social workers ensure that applicants understand that their, and the agency's priority, is to safeguard children and provide the best possible placements to meet their needs. The assessment and training of foster carers is also very good. Potential foster carers are invited to attend 'Skills to Foster' training ahead of their assessment. The agency have also developed a mini session for children and young people who are already part of the family. This helps to ensure that all members of the foster family are fully committed to fostering and are appropriately prepared for the task.

Assessments are completed within required timescales and are formally presented to the fostering panel. This is a newly formed panel; however the panel chair has a wealth of experience in fostering and is effective in his role. Panel membership consists of independent members from a variety of backgrounds and professions. Currently there is no panel member with personal experience of being fostered. This does have the potential to hinder the panel's ability to reflect upon specific issues. That said, the Registered Manager has identified this issue and is in liaison with potential individuals who could add value to the diversity of the central panel list.

Following approval all carers complete the training, support and development standards within their first year of approval. They also have access to a range of post-approval training, such as attachment and child development, safeguarding, managing challenging behaviour and first aid. Foster carers spoken with during the inspection were impressed with the training they receive one stated: 'I'm really impressed with the training. There is a wide variety of training events. We often use support groups as mini workshops and we are able to make suggestions about what training we'd like.' Additional distance learning and online training packs are available to meet the training needs of secondary carers who are at times unable to attend during the day. Foster carers understand the purpose and benefit that training has to raise their awareness, and evidence suggests that they are able to apply their learning in practice accordingly.

Foster carers speak highly about their supervisory visits and the support they receive from the agency. Regular visits, support groups, activities and phone calls ensure that carers feel part of a team. This helps build resilience in carers and promotes retention. Typical comments include 'support is excellent, my supervising social worker is very supportive and I know I can pick up the phone and ask for help' and 'this is a supportive agency, it has a family feel and carers are part of a team.' Foster carers have access to 24-hour support and the agency has an out of hours duty service. Foster carers appreciate this when in crisis, and when requiring additional guidance

and support. Most of the carers are very experienced and act as effective mentors for newly approved carers. The agency is currently looking at developing an induction programme alongside a mentoring scheme. This will further enhance carer skills, knowledge and help develop additional support networks between carers.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The underpinning ethos of this agency is one of care, nurture and protection. Children and young people say they feel safe and well-cared for. The trusting relationships that the children and young people develop with their carers mean that they feel comfortable talking about things that worry them. They know that their foster carers will listen and take action to protect them.

Training in safeguarding and safe care are mandatory for all foster carers. This training ensures that foster carers are well informed about child protection issues. Foster carers spoken with confirm that the training is informative and they now feel more confident about dealing with safeguarding issues. The manager has also implemented internet safety training and is currently arranging Child Sexual Exploitation training for all carers. Clearly the training provided helps foster carers to effectively safeguard children and young people and future training will further inform their practice.

The agency regularly monitors any child or young person who goes missing or may be at risk of sexual exploitation. Missing episodes are extremely rare as most young people are settled in their placements and are making better choices in relation to their personal safety. However, on the rare occasions when young people have either been missing or had an unauthorised absence from their placement, it has been dealt with promptly and in line with agreed protocols. Carers are clear about their duties and responsibilities and work with the young person to encourage them to keep themselves safe.

The agency has good working relationships with the local authority, police, health services, schools and other agencies to protect children and young people who engage in risk taking behaviour. During the inspection the agency was able to demonstrate that they are proactive in engaging with other professionals to safeguard children.

The agency has responded appropriately to allegations made against foster carers. They have liaised fully with the relevant Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and worked in partnership with social workers, foster carers and where appropriate birth families to ensure that a full and thorough investigation takes place in a timely manner. Foster carers understand that allegations may be made against them. Those who have been subject to an allegation felt supported and have benefited from close links with the agency during the investigation process. Any actions raised following concerns are robustly followed up. This ensures that foster carers and the agency reflect upon these experiences and use these to inform future practice.

Safer recruitment and vetting practices ensure that children and young people are not knowingly exposed to people who may pose a risk. Panel members also undergo a similar vetting process. However, not all recruitment files contain a statement from a referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children. While it is good practice to include this statement, this shortfall has no impact on children and young people's welfare currently.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people benefit from strong and effective leadership and management. The Registered Manager communicates her high expectations for the delivery of good quality placements for children and young people. Her vision inclusively focuses on helping children and young people to have a positive experience and develop their full potential. This ethos is very much shared by the foster carers and the staff team alike.

The Registered Manager monitors children and young people's health and education and all aspects of their development. This information is reported to the board of trustees thus ensuring good levels of accountability. However, there is no clear system to systematically track the progress that children and young people make from the start of their placement. This hinders the manager's ability to assess and evaluate the journey that children and young people make in placement.

The agency's Statement of Purpose and children's guide are accessible, easy to understand and shared with foster carers, professionals and children. Children and young people confirm they received a copy of the children's guide and found it useful. Consequently, everyone is well informed about what service they can expect to receive.

Every member of staff who work for the agency are suitably qualified and there is a good mix of experience within the team. Supervising social workers express clear commitment and dedication to their roles and benefit from regular training and development opportunities. Supervision take place on a regular basis and staff confirm they feel supported in their roles. However, supervision records do not document the time and length of supervision consistently. Thus the quality for supervision cannot be readily assessed.

The manager assesses staff performance, competency and conduct on a regular basis which in turn informs their annual appraisals. Foster carers, children and young people speak highly of the social workers, placement support workers and of the service as a whole. However, their views are not gathered for staff appraisals. This is a missed opportunity to undertake a more holistic review of professional practice which would aid the manager to identify development needs within the team.

The agency continues to be financially viable and works in accordance with its

Statement of Purpose. The agency's resources are kept under review. This ensures it remains appropriately staffed at all times. The agency has a clear business development plan and leaders and managers understand their strengths and areas for further development. The service has a clear vision of what they want to achieve and how they are going to achieve it.

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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.