

Red Kite Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector David Morgan
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This fostering agency is part of a small private company. It now has 24 households, 42 carers and 18 children in placements. The fostering households are mainly located in Herefordshire, Wales, Shropshire and the West Midlands.

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 service was registered in 2011. At the first inspection in August 2012 it was operating at a good standard and two recommendations were made, which have been addressed. The service has continued to expand and to restructure accordingly, and has sustained a good standard overall. The service has many highlights, including the excellent outcomes experienced by children, the support of children and carers, effective teamwork, and strong leadership.

The aim of the directors to provide a child-friendly service is being maintained. This means that children are placed appropriately, usually as the only looked after child in the household, and rarely experience breakdowns in their placements. They make remarkable progress in many cases and most remain with their carers into the long term. The safeguarding data for the service compares very favourably with other fostering agencies.

Foster children and the children of carers are engaged well by the service. Their views are gathered systematically and make a difference to their households and to the service. They feel safe and valued.

This inspection makes five recommendations, which primarily address administrative issues. This outcome represents the current stage of development of the service. The service is now firmly established and the manager is seeking to consolidate the practices of carers, staff and panel members.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices (NMS 19.2)

Ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been obtained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)

Ensure that current and prospective foster carers are able to make a complaint about any aspect of the service which affects them directly. This is with regard to the written procedures stating clearly how conflicts of interest between senior personnel are addressed (NMS 21.11)

Provide each person on the central list with an opportunity to attend an annual joint training day with the fostering service's staff (NMS 23.10)

Ensure the service implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers. This is with regard to the policy being applied in all cases (NMS 26.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children experience excellent outcomes. As a result of the particularly effective selection of carers and matching, children make the most of the opportunities carers and the service provide. Children who have suffered severe harm often make unimagined progress. One young man, for example, progressed from having multiple physical interventions every day to being on the school council. A young lady did not communicate and needed constant medical support and is now more articulate than her peers. Priority is given to the views and needs of each child because, in nearly every case, they are the sole looked after child in the household. Depending on their ages and abilities, children also contribute meaningfully to specific aspects of the agency, including reviews of paperwork and the training of carers. Children's views are also shared widely via the regular newsletter.

Nearly all the children have experienced planned arrivals at their foster placements. This process includes their receipt of written and pictorial information about the foster households. As a result, they engage more readily with their carers, who have time to assess accurately the likely efficacy of the placement. As one carer reported, 'We were able to meet the child prior to fostering him and speak to the carers he was with.' The fact that only a very small number of children subsequently experience placement breakdowns shows that this is highly successful. The vast majority of children are of White British heritage and carers readily meet their cultural needs. Foster households establish lasting and effective relationships that develop into long-term placements for almost all the children. One carer said about her foster child: 'He's just my cup of tea!' These features combine into a potent source of support and bonding that helps children to excel.

An intrinsic part of children's progress is their emotional condition. Children benefit noticeably in this critical area, partly from closely coordinated input from children's mental health services. Also, specially trained staff supplement this well by using a form of therapy, based on attachment theory, in which play and touch are key parts. One member of staff said that, 'By implementing this, we have improved the relationships between carers and children by providing opportunities for fun.' Consequently, children improve their feelings of self-worth. In one case, this additional investment meant the young man became, in the words of his reviewing officer, 'completely settled in placement and eager to engage with adults'. Another child ceased his repetitive behaviours and another was able to resume valuable contact meetings with his birth family. As a result, children learn to engage in activities appropriately and equally with their peers, despite their additional needs. The special physical and psychological needs presented by some children are met well.

Feelings of emotional security and physical safety provide children with the newfound confidence to try stimulating things. One child has become more able to respond to instructions, which means he now benefits from a wide range of social and recreational opportunities. For some children this substantial progress is

demonstrated by something as simple as being able to have friends round for a birthday party. All children learn the value of involvement in their communities via their carer's efforts and also the charity work of the agency. High profile and enjoyable events occur in the town, such as community fun days, sponsored walks and other events that raise money. One carer proudly commented, 'They raise money for charity instead of getting money from charity.' Another excellent highlight for children this year was a further trip to the Scottish highlands.

Particularly high rates of school attendance are the bedrock of excellent academic progress. Almost no children experience absences or exclusions, which compares very favourably with other foster services and facilitates their sustained improvements. Children see their carers advocating strongly and effectively with professionals on their behalf. As a result, children are placed in or remain at, the most appropriate education setting for their needs. They receive additional support if required and achieve their targets. Sometimes the agency facilitate this by meeting the cost. This commitment, which exceeds what is expected, minimises bureaucratic delays and means that children progress as quickly as possible.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency's recruitment process is successfully capturing more households than anticipated with a further four households added since March this year and four more being assessed. Advertising campaigns are carefully orchestrated to address the business plan. Carers are of a high calibre and show immense loyalty to the company and its ethos. The assessments of new carers are completed promptly and efficiently. From the point of initial contact, carers benefit from excellent support, whether or not they live close to the head office. Each household has an annual entitlement to respite care, which is carefully managed in light of the needs of the looked-after children. One carer said, 'Everything is good about our fostering service, communication, access to trainings, coffee mornings and support given. Pick up the phone and someone is always there for you. Amazing!' This was confirmed by external agencies, including a social worker, who reported: 'The best thing is the ethos of all the agency and carers. They genuinely provide very good team working and communicate together in a very close collaborative style. They always have the child at the centre of their focus.' The voice of each child is supplemented by extensive and imaginative use of photographs showing their progress.

Foster carers benefit from a high standard of training, some of which includes input from children. The generous range of training dates and formats demonstrates the great emphasis that is placed on ensuring that carer's are competent in the variety of required skills. The children of carers are fully involved too, to ensure they understand the issues. One carer said, 'I have a young son and from the beginning of our assessment he has always been included and his questions answered.' The agency sets a particularly high standard of attendance by carers at training events, which is achieved in the majority of cases. However, some carers do not complete the training, support and induction standards within a year of approval as required.

The rate of success is approximately the same as the national average. Nevertheless, this compromises their ability to care for children as well as possible during the critical early part of their fostering careers.

Carers are fully involved in the placement of new children in their families after the initial gate-keeping by the agency staff. The manager is clear about the types of needs the service can meet and time is taken to ensure as far as possible that each new referral meets these criteria. As a result, the vast majority of placements are successful and children usually remain for long periods. This high standard has a direct benefit to the outcomes for children. Their individual needs are fully understood and plans are agreed in close liaison with social workers, and parents, where appropriate. The progress of children is clear but the service is actively seeking additional ways in which to demonstrate each child's journey. The supervising social workers make a particular effort to mediate between their carers and the local authorities, particularly over difficult or protracted issues. This support is welcomed by carers and releases them to concentrate on the care of the children.

The annual reviews of carers also reflects the closeness of the relationship between staff and carers. Panel receives all the annual reviews of carers not just the first one, as required by regulation. In many cases, the foster children also attend. This excellent attention to detail contributes to the high quality of monitoring provided by the panel. Panel members develop a good understanding of each household and of the service. The membership of each panel is adjusted to reflect the issues that are expected to arise in each meeting. For example, when particular expertise is needed. Good panel management is also demonstrated by panel meetings occurring at the weekends so that more carers are able to attend. The agency works with the panel to learn from shortfalls and prevent them reoccurring. For example, to ensure that routine checks occur for health and safety issues in foster carers homes. Panel training does occur but does not with staff members. This reduces the ability of panel members to find out about the operation of the service.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are protected well and unusually few negative incidents occur. The supervising social workers calculate the risks for each child and establish steps to minimise the likelihood of such incidents occurring. Any shortfall in the information provided by local authorities is pursued rigorously; it is helpful in this regard that nearly all new placements are undertaken in a way that provides sufficient time to obtain relevant background information. As a result, the number of allegations and episodes of children going missing from home or school is consistently low. The staff and carers are familiar with the challenges posed by child sexual exploitation and radicalisation but no incidents have occurred since the last inspection and risk levels are low. This picture compares extremely favourably with other fostering services and confirms that children feel safe with their carers.

The manager effectively applies his background in child protection services. Strong

systems are in place to protect children from dangerous adults and the manager collates any emerging suspicions in order to identify patterns. When necessary, firm action is taken to ensure that only suitable individuals work with children. As the service grows, other staff are increasingly involved in the recruitment processes. However, the records showing how decisions are reached are not always sufficiently clear. This has minimal impact in these particular circumstances because the evidence is elsewhere. However, it does not reflect the agency's own procedures and creates potential risks as the number of staff involved increases.

Since opening, the agency has been subject to almost no complaints. This is a creditable achievement. Those that have arisen have shown that no malpractice had occurred and that procedures were followed rigorously, including close liaison with partner agencies. Where appropriate, lessons have been taken from the events and practices improved. One recent improvement was to the evidence provided by supervising social workers to confirm they have seen children alone. The assessment of new carers now seeks additional references. The complaints procedure, however, does not allow for the fact that the registered manager and the administrator are married. There is, therefore, a potential lack of transparency and objectivity in the event of a complaint against either person. The staff and carers receive a steady flow of compliments and improvements are underway to the collation of this information.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The service benefits from strong and effective leadership. The manager promotes a clear value base about social justice and good parenting, which staff and carers understand and which their version of the Foster Carer's Charter reflects. A carer said, 'I like the philosophy; their explanations make sense.' There is a steady focus on investing time and other resources in improving the lives of children and making a difference. Another carer said, 'The manager is excellent at listening and continually striving to improve.' The manager has extensive knowledge and experience of social work and regulated settings for children. He is qualified and is currently completing a higher qualification in forensic psychology and law. The manager is using recent research to improve the service and is personally researching the role of carers own children in foster care. As a result of their expertise, the directors implement effective business and care strategies. This is a firm basis for effective childcare. Consideration is being given to revising the statement of purpose to reflect their particular approach in more detail.

The last inspection raised two recommendations. Consequently, the children of carers are now involved in the initial Skills to Foster training as a matter of course. This is an important contribution to their understanding, involvement and the stability of placements. Also, training about how to safeguard children has been extended to panel members. This served to emphasise the responsibilities of panel members to contribute to the safety of children. Additional improvements and changes are ongoing as a result of feedback, new regulations and the steady growth of the service. The delegation of responsibilities has been extended and external support

has been introduced to monitor the quality of the service. These steps serve to both increase the capacity of the service and to consolidate its practices. Consequently, the manager has compiled a realistic development plan for the future of the service.

The supervision of team members is supportive but also ambitious. High standards are pursued and great emphasis is placed on only recruiting individuals who can contribute to the aims of the service. As a result, all the team members are enthusiastic and well informed about the carers and children. Staff turnover is minimal. This contributes to the seamless service that carers experience. One feature of the expansion of the service is the recruitment of two family support workers who provide an important and valued contribution to the team. Another feature is that the manager is less involved in direct social work because there are now three other social workers. Staff training programmes are in place and include the development of individual interests, such as outdoor skills, as well as maintaining professional accreditations and updating awareness of safeguarding procedures.

The administration of the service is reviewed regularly to reflect the growth of the agency. The paper files are organised well and information is readily available. However, there is also a parallel electronic system of recording that is used. This data is not covered by the policy and is not secure from alteration. Records that are made electronically are not always transferred to the correct files. This means they are not signed, as required, or as readily accessible to third parties.

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.