

Horizon Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Seka Graovac
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Date of last inspection	05/11/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in London. It aims to meet a range of placement needs for children and young people, including sibling groups and parents with children. It currently has 51 active fostering households with 79 individual carers. It provides placements for 52 children and young people. The agency has expanded by two households in the last 12 months.

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**

The agency is not demonstrating all the characteristics of a good service as described in the inspection framework. The registered persons are not effective at consistently running the fostering service in line with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations, the national minimum standards (NMS) and the good practice guidance. There are a high number of regulatory breaches and failure to meet all NMS. This has resulted in nine requirements and 12 recommendations.

Weakness in the monitoring and quality assurance processes underpin the overall inspection outcome. The registered persons do not robustly monitor the service and its effectiveness at promoting positive outcomes for children, particularly in terms of their education. They have not identified the weaknesses and have not taken actions required to secure full compliance with legislation and good practice guidance.

However, failures have not resulted in children's welfare not being safe guarded and promoted. Some shortfalls identified at the inspection relate to technical regulatory

breaches; others involve not recording good practice robustly and clearly evidencing it. There are a number of weaknesses in the recruitment and management of the fostering panel. A number of recommendations relate to foster carers' training.

The agency works closely with other services to promote positive outcomes for children. The placing authorities provide highly positive feedback about the effectiveness of the placements. The agency has recruited a good range of skilled foster carers who are able to meet children's complex needs. Children have developed secure relationships when fostered; they have a positive experience. They have made good progress across different aspects of their wellbeing.

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 provider and the Registered Manager must-carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. With particular reference to meeting consistently all national minimum standards and Fostering Regulations. (Regulation 8(1))	01/03/2016
The fostering service provider must promote the educational achievement of children placed with foster parents. In particular the fostering service provider must- implement a procedure for monitoring the school attendance of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 16(1)(2)(a))	01/02/2016
For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering agency unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. With particular reference to all panel members. (Regulation 20(3))	01/01/2016
Where the fostering service provider are of the opinion that a person included in the central list is unsuitable or unable to remain on the list, the fostering service provider may remove that person's name from the list by giving them one month's notice in writing. With particular reference to all panel members. (Regulation 23(3))	01/01/2016
The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. With particular reference to having a record of the panel members' relevant	01/12/2015

experiences and qualifications. (Regulation 23 (7))	
Where— having regard to any information obtained under paragraph (1A), the fostering service provider decide that X is not suitable to become a foster parent, or the fostering service provider must notify X in writing that X is not suitable to be a foster parent giving their reasons for that decision. (Regulation 26(1B))	01/01/2016
If a fostering service provider decide to approve X as a foster parent they must- enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the “foster care agreement”). (Regulation 27(5)(b))	01/02/2016
The registered person must maintain a robust system for-monitoring all the matters set out in Schedule 6. (Regulation 35(1))	01/02/2016
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. With particular reference to notifying Ofsted of suspected involvement of a child placed with foster parents in sexual exploitation. (Regulation 36(1) Schedule 7))	01/12/2015

Recommendations

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

Ensure all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and the use of physical interventions. (NMS 3.8)

Promote children’s safety and welfare in all fostering placements. With particular reference to achieving high quality written risk management plans more consistently. (NMS 4)

Make sure foster carers receive training in the management and administration of medication. (NMS 6.10)

Review the fostering panel membership with the view of enhancing its independence. (NMS 14)

Suggest foster carers to the local authority as a potential match for a child only if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child’s assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resources or support required. With particular reference to being able to demonstrate the high quality of matching and any additional plans in relation to the matching gaps, more

consistently. (NMS 15.1)

Evidence that foster carers have attained the training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)

Ensure the reviews of each carer's approval include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards set by the agency, and consideration of training and development needs, which are documented in the review report. The foster carer's personal development plan is reviewed and the effectiveness of training and development received is evaluated. (NMS 20.6)

Ensure all carers consistently receive regular visits by their supervising social worker. (NMS 21)

Provide those joining the central list of persons considered suitable to be fostering panel members with an opportunity to observe a fostering panel meeting. (NMS 23.8)

Give each person on the central list relating to the fostering panel the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's fostering staff. (NMS 23.11)

Ensure all fostering panel members have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually. (The Children Act 1989, Volume 4: fostering services, paragraph 5.15)

Demonstrate that if a provision of the care plan by the responsible authority is delayed, the fostering service has followed this up with the responsible authority, in all cases. (NMS 31.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children develop close and trusting relationships with their foster families. They feel fully included in the family life. They enjoy a broad range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. They go on interesting trips and holidays with their carers. They feel safe and happy living with their carers. Having positive experiences enables them to make positive changes and to move forward in their lives. They make good progress and achieve positive outcomes across different aspects of their health and welfare.

Children experience order and stability at the foster family homes, with their needs met consistently. Living in an emotionally nurturing and physically safe environment provides them with an increased sense of personal security and wellbeing. A young person comments how she loved her bedroom and slept 'like on a cloud'.

Children feel valued for who they are; they have a voice and their views count. They develop their identity and respect towards others. They develop better social skills and friendships, learning to take increasing responsibility for their emotions and behaviour. They see their own family and friends and have overnight stays, when this is appropriate. They eat more nutritious food and develop more active lifestyles. They receive good emotional support and have access to specialist health support, in whichever area of health required.

Children receive constant encouragement to learn and to make good academic or vocational attainments. The supervising social workers and carers advocate well on behalf of children. Children know that the carers genuinely wish them the best and would do anything to help them to grow into safe, happy and successful individuals. This has a positive impact on their confidence and resilience. They allow themselves to have high aspirations, such as going to a top university of their choice. They follow their dreams and take actions to achieve them. For example, recently, a famous football club spotted a child's sporting talent and invited him to join one of their training schemes.

Children gain practical skills that enhance their independence. The care prepares them well for adult life. Children's sense of belonging underpins their continued positive relationships with the foster family beyond the age of 18. They successfully use 'staying put' arrangements or stay in contact with carers after moving out to live independently.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Although many aspects of the quality of the service are good, there are some weaknesses that undermine the quality of the provision.

In the majority of cases, careful matching has contributed to the high stability of the placements. However, the agency does not always clearly record the thinking behind the matching decisions and any planning to address the obvious gaps. For example, the agency

offered to place a child that required a sole placement due to the risk of a negative impact on other children, with a family that already had a foster child vulnerable due to disability. The placement went ahead. When the inspector questioned the basis for this match, the manager responded by saying: 'They (the placing authority) should have not put her there,' saying that it was meant to be for two weeks only. The child has been with the agency's carers for over two months. Some other examples relate to offering placement for children with a known risk of sexual exploitation or with highly challenging behaviours with carers who have not had the relevant experience or training.

The agency offers a good range of training. However, many carers have not taken on this opportunity for learning. Only 60% of foster carers have achieved the training, support and development standards within one year of approval. Despite Ofsted's recommendation at the last inspection for all carers to receive medication training, only 17 out of 79 carers have completed it. Although the agency's expectation is for the carers to attend six training sessions a year as a minimum, the supervising social workers do not consistently enforce this message. An example of this is that an annual foster carer's review report includes positive comments about the level of training attended despite this person having attended only three training sessions that year. Although there is some information regarding the planned training for individual foster carers, not all of them have a clear development plan.

The fostering panel has some weaknesses. While the recruitment for a new chair is in progress, the agency's own supervising social worker chaired the last two panels. All independent social workers who are panel members have some connections with the agency so are not truly independent. For example, they worked for the agency as its supervising social workers in past or are still doing assessments of the prospective carers or currently work for the sister-agency. These close connections compromise the independence of the panel. In addition, none of the panel members have received training from the agency in the last 12 months. The agency has not completed a full appraisal of the individual performance for any of the panel members.

The agency works well with the placing authorities to share all the relevant information with the foster carers. Foster carers have a clear understanding of their role and those of both the placing authority and the agency. They work in close partnership with others to promote positive outcomes for children. They effectively advocate on the children's behalf and passionately promote their rights. However, the agency is unable to consistently demonstrate the supervising social worker's efforts to obtain a placement plan and other information in all cases when the placing authority failed to provide those documents in a timely manner.

Foster carers are highly satisfied with the level of support that the agency provides to them. They feel comfortable ringing their supervising social workers at any time and find all staff very helpful. Supervising social workers visit the carers, usually on a monthly basis. However, in one case, although being in a regular telephone contact, the agency failed to visit the carer for six months. This was despite the difficult time that the foster family had with the placement. It has also meant that the supervising social worker never met the child cared for by the agency for approximately five weeks. The foster carer decided to end this placement, as the young person's behaviour was not improving and the toll on the family was too high.

The fostering service recruits a wide range of foster carers who overall can meet looked after children's diverse and complex needs. A local authority social worker said that she was 'really impressed by the carers' and that the care provided was 'absolutely brilliant'. A placement

officer from a different local authority commented positively about the cultural diversity of foster carers, she says the agency demonstrated having a capacity to offer suitable placements even to those children that she described as 'difficult to place' and that all five current placements are highly effective. She highlighted the quality of matching children with carers as one of the main strengths of the agency. Placing officers from other local authorities made similar positive comments about the effectiveness of placements and the quality of matching.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The records relating to the recruitment of panel members are not comprehensive; for example, there is no information on one panel member's file regarding his work experience or to explain how his background, experience or expertise equipped him to make a meaningful contribution to the fostering panel. The lack of information regarding this person's work-history has also undermined the robustness of seeking references and of the whole recruitment process. In addition, this person has not had an opportunity to observe a panel before recently joining as a full member. The agency's manager who is also the panel advisor said that induction took place, but did not make records in relation to this.

The weaknesses in the panel recruitment and management have not had a negative impact on children. The agency robustly carries out all relevant checks on the carers to ensure that they are suitable for their role. The good aspects of safeguarding practice have resulted in a low number of incidents. Placing officers comment about the agency being very good at 'flagging any issues early, suggesting solutions and working together with other services'. Two of them say that the supervising social workers went out of their way to support children with complex needs and to keep them safe. The agency's relationships with the local authority, the police and other services are strong and contribute to the protection of children.

Carers have good understanding of risks and follow clear reporting protocols when young people are missing. They attend multiagency meetings and consistently implement strategies to minimise any identified risks, including those relating to child sexual exploitation. They have regular discussions with children about their safety and teach them how to be safer. A child said that she could talk with her carer about anything. The records evidence that some children have openly shared their worries with the carers. They have received effective and specific advice on how to protect themselves in certain situations, such as when somebody they do not know approaches them on line. However, the quality of the written information relating to the risk management strategies is varied.

The agency has organised training on a number of topics relating to the promotion of positive behaviours, such as challenging behaviour awareness, promoting positive behaviour and restraint and breakaway techniques. So far, only about a third of carers have attended training on physical interventions. There was only one situation in the last 12 months when a foster carer had to intervene physically, using restraint appropriately to protect the child.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Ineffective monitoring underpins the overall effectiveness judgement of requires improvement. The registered persons have failed to identify many of the weaknesses in the provision that this inspection highlighted. Although based full time at the agency, they do not have a clear grasp of all the areas that require improvement. For example, a week after announcing the inspection, the manager was uncertain if all foster children were in education. After consulting with the supervising social workers, a day later he confirmed in writing to Ofsted that all children were in education. Two days afterwards, this was corrected as it was realised that one child has not had any educational provision since the beginning of the school year. The supervising social worker has been following this up with the placing authority and supporting the carers to provide varied informal learning opportunities for the child in the meantime.

Supervising social workers monitor the children's outcomes, including their school engagement, as part of the visits to foster families. However, there is no systematic recording of educational attendance monitoring.

The responsible individual and the Registered Manager provided incorrect information regarding children's illnesses in the last 12 months. According to their monitoring records, there were none. This is inconsistent with the notification of a significant illness that they sent to Ofsted, in August 2015.

The responsible individual has recently abandoned an information technology project for more automatic data processing and reverted to keeping spreadsheets with manually entered data. However, the inspection showed that the agency's monitoring data is not reliable.

In addition to the gaps already included in this report, there are a number of other weaknesses and regulatory breaches. The registered persons do not consistently run the agency in line with the Regulations, national minimum standards and good practice guidance.

When the manager notified a prospective foster carer that they would not be taking their application for approval forward, he did not include the reasons for this decision in the letter as required. The person has been through a full assessment, a presentation to the fostering panel with a view of approval and a subsequent gathering of further information; they have not been provided with a clear written explanation.

The responsible individual had initially told the inspector that the panel chair resigned; the manager contradicted this. In a letter that he sent to the panel chair, he informed her that due to her limited availability, he decided to set about recruiting an alternative chairperson. Although regulation requires giving a month's notice, this letter did not mention any notice period being observed.

The signed written agreement between the foster carers and the agency does not cover all the matters and obligations stipulated in the relevant regulation and listed in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Regulations. For example, the contract does not specify that carers are required to give written notice to the agency without delay of any intended change of the address or any change in the composition of household.

Ofsted has not received any notifications from this agency regarding suspected involvement of a child in sexual exploitation (CSE). This is despite the supervising social worker's attendance to a multiagency risk management meeting that identified the child that went missing as a high CSE risk. Not sending Ofsted notifications of significant events compromises the regulator's oversight.

Some other examples of the agency's quality assurance processes lack rigour. For example, the minutes of one panel meeting contain incorrect information, referring to the foster carers' son, although they only have a daughter. Also, the children's guide contains some confusing information such as explaining why some children are fostered: 'They have lived with grown-up who can look after you because they may not have kept you safe.'

In contrast, the service does have many strengths. Both registered persons are qualified social workers with many years of work experience at a senior level. The manager who has been in this post since 2008 has recently completed a management qualification. The registered persons have created a genuinely warm, nurturing and friendly atmosphere that inspires honest, open and constructive communication. A foster carer comments on how the manager on a number of occasions enabled her to feel confident, resilient and competent in the face of significant difficulties.

The agency's social workers receive regular supervision and appraisals of their performance that focus on the impact of their practice on the carers and foster children. The placing authorities provided very positive feedback about the communication and the quality of working together with the agency for the benefit of the children. The agency has provided placing authorities with many highly effective placements. A social worker says that she 'had nothing else to say about this agency but praise'.

Many shortfalls identified at the inspection relate to a range of technical regulatory breaches and highlight that the practice is not consistently accompanied by robust record keeping. The shortfalls have not had a negative impact on the outcomes for children that overall, are very positive.

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.