Regional Fostering Services Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC478324
Inspection date	18/01/2016
Inspector	Christine Kennet
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

Setting address	Regus, Regus House, Highbridge Industrial Estate, Oxford Road, UXBRIDGE, Middlesex, UB8 1HR
Telephone number	01895876100
Email	fha2008@hotmail.co.uk
Registered person	Regional Fostering Services Ltd
Registered manager	Ashlea Wilkins (currently on maternity leave)
Responsible individual	Faraz Agha
Date of last inspection	N/A

Service information

Brief description of the service

Regional Fostering Service Ltd is an independent fostering agency based in North West London, which provides placements across London and the Midlands. The agency offers a wide range of placements, which includes short and long-term placements, mother and child, respite, planned and emergency placements. Registration of this agency took place in July 2014. They became operational in September 2014 and currently have 19 approved sets of foster carers and 30 looked after children in placement.

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 fostering agency is early in its development. Since registration in July 2014 the agency has focussed on recruiting foster carers. To date the agency has approved 19 foster families and has 30 looked after children in placement.

The service offers good quality of care, and the outcomes for children and young people are positive. Children and young people including some with complex needs, receive personalised care, which meets their individual needs well. Safeguarding has a high priority and the range of placements offered at this early stage of the agency's development is impressive.

Regional Fostering Services supports children and young people to live and thrive in good quality placements. The agency provides good support to prevent placement breakdowns from occurring. As a result, unplanned endings are rare. There is a

diverse, experienced and committed team of foster carers. Foster carers describe this agency with words such as 'caring', 'feeling like a family' and 'offering good support'. They work as a team with support workers and managers to provide high quality care, which pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity.

The recruitment of foster carers is impressive, with quality assessments, which focus on attachment, loss and separation. Assessments are analytical and bring out overall experiences and skills. They are completed within timescales and where this needs to be extended there are good reasons, for example overseas checks.

Foster carers feel involved and say they feel valued. Many of them joined this agency due to positive previous experiences of support from the management team in other fostering services. Foster carers enjoy involvement in planning and decision making about care planning for children and young people, right through to giving their views on strategic development.

Children and young people's participation is beginning and their feedback thus far has influenced thinking. This is an area for ongoing development for this agency and they have in place clear strategic plans for better involvement in the future.

There are effective and robust policies and systems in place to ensure that children and young people remain safe. Assessing social workers conduct thorough assessments of skills and risk areas. These in turn translate into risk assessments and safer care plans for children and young people.

A strength of this agency is their ability to work well with partner organisations and parents to ensure good quality care. There is compromise and support to ensure progress for children and young people.

This fostering service is managed well. Leaders and managers are effective and feedback is overwhelmingly positive. The Registered Manager is currently on maternity leave however, there is a plan in place to provide interim cover. The prospective interim manager, spoken to during inspection is appropriately experienced and indicates their wish to take on this role if required. The responsible individual currently oversees the service. He is very experienced and knows the foster carers and the children and young people well. A strong quality assurance system regularly reviews the agency function and ensures the quality of service as well as the plans for future service development.

Some shortfalls for ongoing development include ensuring the accessibility of the Children's Guide particularly for younger children; participation for children, young people and their parents and ensuring the agency hold the placing authority accountable for their part in implementing the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) Protocol.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- Ensure where children placed out of authority go missing, the manager of the fostering service follows the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol. They also comply with, and make foster carers aware of, any other processes required by the responsible authority, specified in the individual child's plan and in the RMFHC protocol covering the authority responsible for the child's care[1](NMS 5.7)
- Ensure subject to the child's age and understanding, the fostering service ensures the child receives the Children's Guide at the point of placement and that the foster carer explains the contents of the Children's Guide in a way that is accessible. (NMS 16.3)
- Ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7)
- Ensure staff keep key documents up to date. These include risk assessments and case file records. (NMS 26.2)

[1] Statutory Guidance on children who run away and go missing from home and care – 3.5(27).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Where placements are planned introductions between children and prospective foster carers take place. All foster carers have a profile, which can be shared with children prior to introductions or placement. This gives children an idea of what to expect, who lives at the foster home, what they look like and so on. Foster carers share a Children's Guide when they arrive at the home, which is adapted depending on their age and understanding. This ensures children and young people receive age appropriate information about their foster carers and the agency and supports transition into placements.

Children and young people are well cared for in accordance with their written care or pathway plans. Supervising social workers and foster carers understand their care plans and chase placing authorities where anything is unclear. Relationships observed in foster homes showed extremely good attachments, with children and young people at ease in the presence of their foster carers. Children and young people are encouraged to make choices or are helped to understand when choices are not in their best interests. For example, they are encouraged to make choices about their transition to independence, contact arrangements, menu choices, activities and whether or not to attend places of worship. Children and young people are encouraged to attend their looked after children's reviews, supported by foster carers and staff of the agency.

Children and young people feel safe and at ease with their foster carers. For example one social worker says, 'X has a really good relationship with her foster carer, this is unusual as often she struggles with change. She is more confident in herself, looking after herself, putting on make-up and dressing better.' Unplanned endings occur infrequently. If it is in children's best interests' placing authorities along with the agency consider long-term options. For example, an adoption placement for one large sibling group, special guardianship or staying on in foster care after 18 years of age. The agency takes the view that provided the placement is right, they will support foster carers to think about long term arrangements.

There are a wide range of opportunities and help to support young people to achieve. For example, clear boundaries and routines within foster homes to ensure appropriate behaviour, healthy eating and gym membership/personal trainer. Home tuition and additional educational support to help young people catch up or to support transitions back into education. Football activities in holidays, after school and breakfast clubs as well as a wide range of activities within foster placements and interactions with foster families own networks. The agency supports contact to maintain links with birth families where this is appropriate and tries to ensure siblings are placed together if possible.

Children have been involved in two participation events where they have had an opportunity to give their views directly to leaders and managers. They also give their written views which are taken back to foster carer groups and training sessions.

Children are encouraged to give their views for the annual reviews of carers and these inform supervisions and appraisals of carers. The agency has made a good start to participation for young people, however this area is in its infancy and more structure around planning for future events to maintain this momentum and encourage children's participation is required. Children and young people have access to simple information about how to complain. Supervising social workers regularly see children and young people on their own and give them opportunities to speak in confidence. They also have good information about advocacy services should these be needed along with various helpline numbers. Statutory reviews are timely. The children's guide also addresses issues of bullying and gives various helplines to children directly.

Foster carers support and encourage positive behaviour, for example, praise or simple rewards for good behaviour. Negative behaviours are discouraged with reasons and sanctions made where necessary and in line with care plans. Most young people are not offending, misusing drugs or alcohol or going missing. One young person who is vulnerable to this is receiving appropriate support from drug and alcohol services and has a clear risk assessment identifying risks and strategies to reduce behaviours. The agency requests strategy meetings if there are concerns. For example, a meeting where one young person was victim of an assault. Such meetings consider risks, review plans and consider how to prevent further incidences.

Children and young people lead healthy lifestyles. Foster carers support routine health appointments and ensure statutory medicals, opticians and dental appointments take place. A healthy eating advice document is available for children and young people and addresses key food, nutrition and healthy eating issues. This is available to all ages but used primarily with young people moving towards independence. There is good access to any required specialist services, for example, portage support, speech therapy or drug and alcohol support. Carers and supervising social workers support psychological or therapeutic help as required. Some children and young people receive this service via community based mental health services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) The agency has access to direct therapeutic services including play therapists if required. One young person with a disability claims direct payments and disability living allowance (DLA) to remain in placement with his carers.

Children and young people's educational and learning outcomes are positive. Pre-school children regularly attend playgroups or nursery provision to support their development. Support workers help foster carers to transport children and young people to attend their local schools. Two older young people are choosing not to access education. They are encouraged to participate in supported living skills and parenting class groups as alternatives. The agency has actively supported education by providing additional tuition to help children catch up, or has topped up home tuition where transitional arrangements are not in place. Progress is good for young people from their starting points, for example, one young person has improved academically as well as behaviourally in school. Another has moved from home tuition at home to receiving tuition within the community, with a plan to transition back to mainstream school. Home to school liaison books support communication

between carers and school.

Children are actively involved in their foster family's life and events. Staff support and arrange contacts and on occasions are facilitating and supervising this where it is in the best interests of children and young people.

Children and young people are prepared through everyday living skills in their foster homes, in preparation for independence. As the agency is within its infancy, there is currently only one young person remaining living with his foster family post 18 years; however, this is expected to rise over coming years as the agency becomes more established.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency has a diverse and committed group of carers with a wide range of skills and experiences. Children in their care make good progress, receive a good quality of care, and thrive in stable placements. The agency has recruited a wide range of diverse foster carers from assorted backgrounds and experiences. They have a good mix of carers from white UK, African, Caribbean, Iranian and Bangladeshi backgrounds. There is a wealth of languages spoken within the foster carer and agency staff group. There are Christian, Muslim and non-practicing carers available. Staff manage complex placements well with additional support provided where necessary from support workers within the agency or outside specialist support if needed. For example additional home tuition or buying therapeutic services.

The recruitment of foster carers has been very effective; during the first 18 months of registration, 19 foster carers were approved at panel. There is a higher than usual ratio of conversion from enquiries to approval, which is explained by a higher than usual number of foster carers choosing to transfer over from other agencies. Foster carers commented they knew the leaders and managers previously and tracked them down due to receiving good support. During the inspection, many carers commented on this being the reason for choosing this agency. At the time of the inspection, there are a number of foster carer assessments underway. The agency continues to target the recruitment of foster carers through social media with positive responses as it recognises that the initial flush of carers transferring will not be sustained.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is good and focuses on the needs of children and young people. Foster carers say that initial responses to their enquiries happened quickly. For example, comments such as 'really quick', 'helpful, informative website', 'came straight away' and 'fast personal contact', encouraged them to continue with the assessment process. Foster carers felt well informed about the assessment process and overall appeared to have enjoyed the process, for example a foster carer commented, 'I liked it, it digs deep and covers your life, this is your life! The assessment captured it quite accurately.' Qualified independent social workers with lengthy experience of fostering complete good quality, analytical and comprehensive assessments which cover the competencies and strengths and outline areas for development.

All foster carers attend a 'choosing to foster' course initially and are subsequently expected to engage in required training, support and development standards within a 12 month period. Following required training, supervising social workers develop a personal development plan (PDP) for each foster carer which is implemented through regular support groups and training. Some carers for this agency have specialist knowledge or experience and this is utilised within the agency, for example, one carer has experience as a residential social worker and helps as a support worker on a regular basis. Another carer is a drugs and alcohol worker and is prepared to offer training to other carers. One foster carer is a qualified social worker and uses experience to support others through mentoring. The PDP is designed to meet the need and level of individual carers, for example, an experienced foster carer is completing training to become a trainer for other carers.

There is access to respite care if needed and foster carers have a buddy system. The agency attempts to place within the mentor/buddy system for respite breaks so that children are familiar with carers. The agency supports foster carers financially to take children and young people on holiday with them, thus giving them opportunities to experience a family holiday and feel included.

Foster carers benefit from an effective training programme. 78% of carers have completed the training, support and development standards. Those that have not are still within their first year of fostering. The agency has given thought to supporting this and supervising social workers work through the programme with them to ensure understanding and motivation.

The agency also works with three different training companies to outsource training and the responsible individual keeps a full training record folder to ensure a record of training attended. Online training with access to over 100 courses provides accessible levels depending on ability and helps provide safe and nurturing placements. The agency also do face-to-face training, targeted according to the individual PDP's and tailor made depending on previous skills and training completed. One foster carer says, 'I had more specialist training due to complex needs of a foster child, if we request it, it is supported.' Overall foster carers views on the quality of training are positive, some preferred online training and others face-to-face.

This agency is very inclusive. Foster carers say they followed the leaders and managers and want to work with them. They feel supported and work in partnership well to provide high quality care to children. Supervising social workers and carers attend all professional meetings with placing authorities and other agencies such as education and health and are very much part of the team around the children they care for. This is important in information sharing and planning for children and young people's futures.

Foster carers describe feeling well supported via the leaders and managers, their supporting social workers and the out of hour's system. Support groups take place every six weeks, one in Northamptonshire and one in London. Foster carers enjoy

this opportunity to meet together and share difficulties, strengths and frustrations. For example, one foster carers says, 'they are helpful and we can discuss and share ideas.' Supervisions happen regularly and supports placements well. Foster carers say support is 'good', they describe the agency as 'responsive', 'there when you want something done' and the workers as 'on the ball' and 'nice and fresh'.

The panel promotes safe and secure placements and actively engages with the agency without being collusive. Some close relationships exist but are well managed, and the agency is transparent about these, ensuring no conflict of interest Panel minutes and decisions are clear, well thought through and without conflict. The panel quality assures assessments and reviews and the agency has improved these documents as a response to feedback over their first year and a half in practice. The central list contains a diverse mix of members and has an eclectic and varied mix of expertise. Panels are quorate and within the first 18 months received two training days for members on the central list.

The agency operates a good matching process, which carefully identifies basic matching, for example numbers, ethnicity, language, religion, type and geographical location. Supervising social workers consider further matching directly with foster carers before any agreement to placement. The agency considers whether carers can meet specific needs prior to approaching foster carers, so they are already sure the carer has the skills to meet the young person's needs. Foster carers make the final decision on whether they can accept the placement. The low breakdown rate evidences good matching. One commissioning worker says, 'the matching of young people is really good, they are very clear about what they can and can't do.' The careful matching process supports more stable and secure placements for children and young people.

Reviews of children and young people's care plans are taking place in a timely way, which ensures effective planning and prevents drift. The leaders and manager network well within their profession and use this network in the best interests of children. Foster carers understand about delegated responsibility for the children and young people they take care of. There are clear explanations included within their handbook. This ensures that children and young people have opportunities to enjoy and participate to the full.

The agency is in its infancy of participation, but has begun this process well. There have been two participation groups thus far and the agency is planning further events to engage and include and hear children's views. Children provide feedback for foster carer reviews and these inform supervision and reviews, which helps to improve practice.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Safeguarding is at the centre of this agency. The safety and welfare of children and

young people takes priority for foster carers and agency staff. The agency staff and foster carers know the children and young people well, including their vulnerabilities and associated risk factors. Foster carers receive the information they need to understand children and young people's backgrounds, which helps them understand underlying causes of displayed behaviour.

Children and young people are supported to learn independence skills and take age appropriate risks by joining in activities, negotiating arrangements with families where appropriate and are given necessary tools to protect themselves, learn about potential risks and how to keep themselves safe. They have written information about how to complain and about advocates, who they are and how they can support them to complain. Social workers, leaders, and managers have regular contact with children where they can listen to and hear concerns raised by them if needed.

Children have clear placement plans and risk assessments that foster carers assist in creating. These identify the history and likely risk factors and give strategies and support to alleviate such risks. Some risk assessments require updating more regularly although the main factors are present and no children were actively at risk as a result. In one case, some risks emerged during the inspection. The agency response to this risk was appropriate, robust and prompt.

Safeguarding policies in this agency are thorough and give clear advice and procedures on safeguarding issues.

The incidence of children and young people going missing is low. When young people do go missing, there are clear risk assessments with reviews and strategies in place. Young people are not routinely offered return home interviews by independent workers and the agency has not advocated for this to happen. This would ensure consideration of all potential risk factors and may highlight further actions to safeguard. Foster carers understand and feel confident about what to do if young people in their care go missing. Comprehensive handbooks are available which outline processes for carers. Leaders are readily available to give advice and support and to make decisions about safeguarding.

The agency is proactive in calling strategy or disruption meetings to work effectively in partnership and ensure all safety measures to protect children and young people are in place.

Good professional relationships exist with the placing authorities, Local Safeguarding Children Board, (LSCB) schools, police and health services. Other agencies support more specialist needs such as drugs and alcohol. The safeguarding policy is shared with the LSCB. Where there are standard of care issues or where there are child protection concerns or allegations, the agency follows procedures to ensure children and young people's safety.

Foster carers are fully aware of the potential risks and historical risks for children. Training equips foster carers to feel confident of what to do in the event that disclosures are made. Foster carers understand that children and young people's

history can affect their current experiences and safe caring plans help to reduce and minimise risks as far as possible.

Safeguarding is central to the assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers. The agency undertakes unannounced visits to foster carers and routinely sees children and young people alone. Children and young people are asked to provide feedback and share concerns and worries.

Staff recruitment and vetting is thorough and compliant with regulations and employment standards.

The Registered Manager's report on quality of care clearly identifies and incorporates the views of staff members, foster carers and young people. The whistle blowing policy identifies how to report concerns if needed and this is in the fostering handbook and the staff handbook.

The agency appropriately reports allegations to the designated officer and takes positive action to support and protect children. There is appropriate support for carers if allegations occur. The agency works in line with its own procedures and consistently applies them. This ensures the appropriate authorities are informed when allegations are made.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering services has ambitiously established itself as an independent agency, providing services across North West London and the Midlands. The leaders and manager are highly skilled, well qualified and experienced to manage the service efficiently and with positive results. The Registered Manager is on maternity leave currently, but arrangements are in place for a suitably qualified and experienced interim manager to provide cover during this period. The responsible individual is ambitious to continue to develop and expand the service. Leadership and management is strong and the service is well run. Foster carers, commissioning agencies and other professionals hold the leaders and managers in the highest regard. Many of the foster carers reported moving agencies to follow them, citing their individual approach, commitment and child centred style as reasons.

Leaders and managers have worked hard to develop effective relationships with placing authorities and social workers, as well as other agencies providing and co-ordinating services for children. For example drug and alcohol workers, designated officers and the LSCB. The agency has signed into the London Care councils (LCS) contract for services to be provided. Placement planning and review processes are meeting children's needs through partnership working.

Children are encouraged to have fun and be involved in activities within school and

the community. Two events have taken place over the past year, one at an adventure park and a meal out with carers, children and young people. Foster carers are encouraging activities such as after school clubs, swimming and football clubs. Impressively leaders and managers know all the children well and have regular contact with them. Where progress is slow or there are concerns about practice, the agency promptly pursues this on behalf of children and young people. The agency takes its responsibility seriously to ensure it advocates for children and young people and keeps their safety as central to practice.

A detailed monitoring report of the quality of the service for its first year has been completed and this included the views of children and young people, foster carers and social workers. The agency is yet to include the views of parents in this process, but actively seeks their views where they attend statutory meetings. The review information informs a development plan for the future of the service. Quality and performance data forms are completed and submitted to Ofsted.

The agency uses an electronic recording and database system, which includes effective systems for monitoring most aspects of the service's operation. For example, it provides information to assist matching and tracks individual children and young people's progress and outcomes. The agency out sources many features of its administration such as legal advice, policy, accounts and training, allowing it to concentrate on service delivery. The business is financially viable.

The statement of purpose is comprehensive and clearly outlines the aims and objectives of the service. The children's guide contains a simplified version for children and young people and offers an informative question and answer section. The content is good and it provides helpful information about complaints, advocacy and helpline contacts. The simplified guide for younger children could be more user friendly to make this more accessible. Neither document is accessible on the agency website; however, by the end of the inspection the statement of purpose had been added to the website. The 'foster carer's charter' is adopted by the agency and incorporated into the statement of purpose and foster carer's handbook.

The fostering service maintains good electronic records and strives to be a paper free service. The inspection identified minor weaknesses in some records. The recordings of some weekly summaries and risk assessments are not consistently updated and hence did not always reflect the current situation.

Managers are keeping an overview on trends and patterns to target recruitment. This is early days for this agency and they have successfully recruited 19 carers over their first 18 months in practice. Already the agency is considering that demand is for teenagers and sibling groups. There is ongoing recruitment of new carers in both stages of the assessment process.

There is an experienced team of workers running the agency and on the central list for the panel. All hold the appropriate qualifications or requirements for their job responsibility. Staff receive induction training and more specialised training such as panel training and supervising social work training. Supervisions are effective, regular, and well recorded. Appraisals are just beginning and will review both the

areas of excellence and address practice issues. The panel chair and panel advisor will complete appraisals of the panel members practice.

Notifications to the regulator are timely and appropriate and indicate the agency is taking actions to address difficulties as they arise including notifying the relevant agencies.

This is the first inspection for this new agency. It shows a well-organised and well-run service, which is providing positive outcomes for children and young people. There is a realistic development plan in place, which will support the agencies ambition to continue to offer quality care to vulnerable children and young people.

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.