

# Young People at Heart Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspection date</b>	7 March 2016
<b>Inspector</b>	Rosie Davie
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<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Gary Cox
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	N/A

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Based in Essex, this not-for-profit independent fostering agency is recruiting carers in Essex, Suffolk, Thurrock, Kent and the East London boroughs. The agency offers emergency, short-term, long-term, permanent, and some parent and child placements.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement, where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so that 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**

The fostering service was registered in April 2015. The first inspection took place shortly before the service was due to celebrate its first year. A carer currently in assessment said: 'I like the way that they explain the ethos, which is exactly what the agency is called.'

The founder, who is the responsible individual, has previous significant experience of working within the independent fostering sector at executive levels. Self-funding the start-up of this not-for-profit service, he is motivated to ensure that any child or young person accessing the service receives high standards of care from well-supported, motivated and engaged foster carers and their families. As a result, he has a clear philosophy, and aspirations for the service to evolve ethically, and grow and change children's and young people's lives in preparation for adulthood.

The service is in the early stages of development. The regulatory shortfalls identified are not widespread and should not overshadow the dedication and hard work from all involved to set in place the foundations of this enthusiastic agency.

There are seven carer households caring for 12 children and young people. All current carers have transferred from other independent fostering agencies, which means that they are experienced. Those in assessment have the opportunity to meet existing carers to help them to understand the agency's expectation, which is to have children and young people at the heart of all activity.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards (NMS). The registered person must comply with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Provide the chief inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted on request to any local authority and ensure that the review provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (2) (3))	29/04/2016
No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel- (i) either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs, (ii) one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience and (iii) three, or in the case of a fostering panel established under regulation 23(5) four other members. This is with specific reference to reconvening to review any additional information requested by the panel when considering any recommendation of approval and any terms on which the approval is to be given. (Regulation 24 (1))	29/04/2016

### Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment, with specific reference to family and individual child safer-care policies and accommodation health and safety records. (NMS 4.5)
- Ensure that panels provide a quality-assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of the reports being presented to panel. (NMS 14.2)

- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's and young person's assessed needs, and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. This is with specific reference to consultation with the local authority for any existing child or young person in placement. (NMS 15.1)
- Ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. This is with specific reference to carers transferring from other agencies with children and young people in placement. (NMS 20.5)
- Ensure that entries in records, including carer supervision records, safer-care policies, and accommodation health and safety assessments, are signed and dated. (NMS 26.5)
- Ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer. This is with specific reference to the role of the social worker and the role of the support worker. (NMS 21.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The thriving children and young people who have come to this service with their foster carers all continue to gain from stable, long-term placements. They benefit from acceptance and are embraced by their carers into the fabric of the extended family. One child said: 'This is my home and I love everything about living here.' Encouraged and supported by the agency, they take part in a range of energising activities such as cricket, football, and drama. One carer said: 'The agency has a good ethos. They want to make sure that all the children can swim and have access to a bicycle of their choice. So, to do that, they are paying for that to happen.'

The majority of children and young people live with a sibling and some live with more than one. All have the opportunity to see other members of their birth families, as defined through care planning processes. This places significance on the value of life-long relationships. One carer said: 'The children are part of our family and they also have their own family to see and spend time with. We help them with that and that is just what happens.' Moving forward, the agency aspires to ensure that it can provide similarly stable placements for sibling groups that are referred.

The children and young people in placement are of school age. All attend, and the majority continue to exceed expectations. Some receive awards from their placing authority in recognition of their efforts to succeed. The agency, emulating this approach, recognises achievement through praise and reward. This helps the children and young people to feel valued and it raises self-esteem.

The agency has current plans to develop models of participation, and is actively seeking out children's and young people's views about how to progress this meaningfully. Each young person has a guide about the service, which helps them to understand the level of service that they can expect. All of those represented for this inspection knew the registered manager and had met, on more than one occasion, the responsible individual.

To date, there has been a limited number of new placements. Those that have taken place have been emergency or short term. The agency considers all referrals. However, it currently has limited carer capacity. A current focus is to build the carer pool. However, because the agency is looking to ensure that carers recommended for approval can demonstrate the commitment that those re-assessed and transferring are showing to children and young people, it approaches the assessment process mindfully. The registered manager said: 'This is not a heads-on-beds service.'

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The primary method for selection and recruitment of carers is word of mouth. New carers said: 'We heard that the agency was to be not for profit. We liked the idea that money is being put back for the children to benefit from.'

Qualified social workers undertake detailed assessments. Carers interested in transferring from other agencies, including those with children and young people in placement, are re-assessed. This re-assessment includes all statutory household checks and the prospective carers attending condensed training. This ensures a methodical approach to the complete assessment process for both existing and new carers.

The agency is developing a system to document the progress that children and young people make in placement. Approved foster carers and their families already receive good, reliable, regular support from staff working in the agency. One carer said: 'They have delivered everything that they said that they would. When they say they give us 24-hour support that is what they mean.' In addition, supervision takes place in the carer's home. The registered manager currently undertakes the majority of carer supervisions. However, records sampled show that non-qualified staff have delivered some supervisions. This has minimal impact on the children placed currently but does have the potential to blur statutory responsibilities and therefore does not meet the minimum standards.

The foster carers recruited to date fully understand their role within the agency and their responsibilities to the children and young people whom they care for now and plan to care for in the future. They prepare for looked-after reviews and want the placing authorities to see the positive difference that living in their homes continues to make for their children and young people. They diligently support family contact, working with the children and young people at the centre to achieve positive outcomes. Carers of children and young people placed from different ethnicities are motivated to attend additional training, ready to learn more about how to continue to ensure that cultural differences are valued and celebrated in the foster home.

Transferring carers have completed the training and met the development standards. The agency is clear that carers new to fostering are required to complete this training within the required timescale. The agency staff deliver some training. However, there is also a range of experienced individuals commissioned to deliver on themes such as child sexual exploitation and attachment. This means that training is stimulating for proficient carers. One family said: 'We like that training is varied and delivered by different people, because it means that we learn more from their experience.' However, personal development plans from the carer files sampled for this inspection do not yet set out how the agency will support those carers to undertake development work appropriate to their needs and the changing needs of the children and young people placed.

A knowledgeable, motivated, and well-qualified chair leads the newly formed panel. She describes a clear vision for the developing foster panel, which will include a foster carer from another agency and an adult previously looked after. Members' personal and professional experiences fittingly reflect wide-ranging expertise from across the child-care spectrum. Unambiguously recorded minutes evidence that arrangements are clear and that the panel promotes thorough assessments, which in turn evidence the rationale for recommendations to the agency decision maker. However, in one case sampled, the panel had appropriately requested additional information from the agency before making a recommendation. While this evidences active engagement with the agency, the arrangement on this occasion fails to meet regulation. This is because while the panel corresponded in writing following receipt of the new information, it failed to reconvene to discuss the potential impact. This example is unlikely to have led the panel to a different recommendation for approval. However, it may have influenced the recommendation for the terms of approval. Additionally, the agency is not yet able to evidence examples of any written quality-assurance feedback from the panel about the quality of reports presented.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Recruitment, re-assessment, assessment, supervision and general training of foster carers emphasise a collective responsibility for safeguarding and protecting children and young people. As a result, carers are often mindful of the impact of the trauma caused by previous experiences. This means that the children and young people are likely to seek support from their carers if they have concern or fear.

Written policies and procedures are clear in highlighting the expectations of carers and staff in working effectively to keep children and young people safe at all times. As a result, missing episodes are a rarity because the agency takes purposeful action when it sees that individual children and young people referred cannot be kept safe. However, the current implementation of written risk assessments for children and young people is not yet sufficiently vigorous. For example, samples of family safer-care policies, individual safer-caring plans, and accommodation health and safety risk assessments lack detail. This means that risk assessments are not yet live documents that robustly identify the reasonable steps that need to be taken to prevent harm in specific cases. As a result, the arrangements for recording risk fall short of minimum standards.

The assessment process is evaluative, and the rationale for the agency decision is evident. Yet, in one case sampled the agency made a parent and child placement, which was outside of the carer's approved range. Furthermore, the placement happened without prior consultation with the social worker of an existing child looked after living in the family. While there were no known incidents of concern resulting from the short-lived placement, the practice does not reflect effective understanding



of the potential impact of another adult coming to live in the foster home.

Children and young people confidently say that they feel safe living with their foster families. Each has received a guide about what to expect from this fostering service, and all represented knew what to do should they feel the need to raise worries or complaints. Some of the children and young people represented in this inspection identified teachers alongside their foster carers as their trusted adults. All of the children and young people in the service have met the responsible individual and all of the staff from the service. Many spoke about having taken part in some of the activities organised by the service, such as the pantomime and summer picnic. This means that staff are successfully engaging the children and young people and getting to know them and their circumstances.

The responsible individual and registered manager are motivated to place safeguarding at the heart of practice. For example, they aim to exceed the statutory requirement for annual unannounced visits and conclude enquiries where initial discussions have identified that prospective applicants or their circumstances are unsuitable.

The recruitment and vetting processes for staff and panel members are thorough and robust. Pre-employment checks and reference verification ensure that those working in the agency are appropriately credible. Records of staff supervision evidence that there is accountability within the supervisory relationship.

Managers attend to suspicions of harm raised in relation to foster carers or members of their family. There is liaison and effective working relationships with police and placing authorities. Reflective discussion takes place with the foster family, and this promotes learning when allegations are unsubstantiated.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The manager has worked in social care for a number of years. Registered with Ofsted, he is qualified with significant relevant experience of working with foster carers. The children and young people, the foster carers and their families know him. They feel confident about approaching him to discuss the children's and young people's plans and the agency expectations. This means that he is accessible and available. One family said: 'Time is not an issue. The manager is available day or night.'

The responsible individual has a pivotal role in the running of the service. He said: 'This has been the best year of my working life so far.' He takes a proactive and hands-on approach. For example, he has been to every carer household, met their children and each of the children and young people placed. This means that he is committed to the success of the agency. More than one carer said that they had delivered the key things that they promised at the very beginning.

The registered manager and the responsible individual are working together closely

to ensure that they develop an efficient understanding of the needs of contracting local authorities. One carer said: 'Together they have a passion and belief in putting children first.' They intend to form meaningful and effective working relationships with placing social workers in order to ensure that children's and young people's needs remain at the centre of the service. One representative from a placing authority said: 'They seem to be fantastic because they are very quick to turn things around if there are any issues.' The agency is also willing to challenge, including the carers. One placing social worker said: 'The children have been in placement for a number of years but I have noticed that this agency is not afraid to challenge them to think about things from the child's point of view.'

The registered manager has begun to complete monthly management reports, which enable him to track, evaluate and scrutinise statistics alongside the progress of each individual child, thus enabling him to have oversight of the effectiveness of the service and to be ready to discuss this with key stakeholders. However, at the point of inspection he had not yet developed a system for providing the chief inspector with a report demonstrating improvements or the process of consultation within the service.

The service stores all records electronically. The arrangements fall short because some examples sampled, such as carer supervision records and safer-care plans, are not signed. This can lead to misunderstanding about what has been discussed and agreed.

This agency has a flat structure. This means that children and young people benefit from expedient practice and business decisions. For example, the agency saves weekly for each child and young person, to ensure that there is a sum of money ready for use when they leave the service. This creative approach means that the service is thinking ahead, like a responsible parent, and on behalf of the child or young person.

The statement of purpose is available on the organisation's website. It sets out the aims, objectives and aspirations for the agency. Future plans include the recruitment of additional staff to support children and young people in education, to provide therapeutic intervention and to oversee quality-assurance functions.

The responsible individual has employed a support worker to assist the service in engaging directly with the children and young people looked after and the foster carer's children. The role includes the organisation of fun events and gatherings. Recently, the birth children of carers had the opportunity to come together to share experiences. One young person said: 'It makes a difference to be asked what fostering means to us.'

Other developments for the service include identification of a reviewing officer for carer annual reviews, appointment of a panel vice chair and more opportunities for the birth children of the carers to meet to share experiences about the impact of fostering. This means that there are live plans to improve and expand the agency. One family said: 'We feel very confident that this will be an excellent agency to be part of.'

The responsible individual and the registered manager began to act on the shortfalls identified from this inspection during the inspection, which means that they are proactive, motivated to demonstrate effectiveness and committed to achieving regulatory compliance. The registered manager said: 'There should be no reason why together we can't make a difference to children's lives.'

## 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.