

Action for Children Fostering Midlands

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Christy Wannop
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Date of last inspection	N/A

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This small independent fostering agency is part of a national charitable organisation for children. It is based in premises shared with a registered adoption agency, which is part of the same organisation. This is the first inspection since it was established as a separately registered branch in April 2014.

There are currently eight approved fostering households. Six foster families are caring for ten children and young people in placement. The fostering service provides long-and short-term placements for children and young people.

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

This small agency has struggled to grow. Recruitment of foster carers has been slow and the agency has not made any placements of children or young people in the last 12 months.

Foster carer retention and placement stability have been issues. Five fostering households were terminated in the last 12 months. Over two years, the service identified that between 34% and 27% of placements ended before time. Although a decreasing rate, this is still significantly higher than the national average of 12%.

The agency has established excellent rigour in decision making when people are not suitable to work as foster carers. Safeguarding practice is sound and Ofsted has no concerns about how the agency or its foster carers protect children and young people. Skilled, thoughtful, reflective social workers and support staff know all the foster carers and children and young people well. A theoretical perspective is beginning to shape the approach as it is delivered in foster homes. Foster carers speak highly of the agency and its support. Placing authorities, too, are positive. Children and young people say that they feel at home in their foster families. They are doing well at school.

Shortfalls include consultation, a shared review of the quality of care, managerial monitoring of practice against policy, patterns and trends, a regular, rigorous annual review of foster carers, training, including timeliness, and records of recruitment for associated consultants. The manager and the wider organisation recognise that improvements are needed and they have plans to improve the situation.

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. The registered person must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
35	The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any regulation 35 review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35 (2))	30 May 2016
28	The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. If the fostering service provider decides, taking into account any recommendation made by the fostering panel, that the foster parent and the foster parent's household continue to be suitable, and that the terms of the foster parent's approval continue to be appropriate, they must give written notice to the foster parent of their decision. (Regulation 28 (1)(2)(6))	30 May 2016
38	Where the registered manager proposes to be absent from the fostering agency for a continuous period of 28 days or more, the registered person must give notice in writing to the Chief Inspector of the proposed absence, no later than one month before the proposed absence is to start,. Where the absence arises as a result of an emergency, the registered person must give notice of the absence within one week of its occurrence, specifying the matters mentioned in sub-paragraphs (a) to (e) of paragraph (2). (Regulation 38 (1)(2)(3))	30 May 2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the decision maker is also responsible for deciding whether a person and their household remain suitable to foster, and whether the terms of approval remain suitable, following each review of the foster carer's approval. (Statutory guidance- Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 2, page 19)
- Ensure that any staff involved in assessing the suitability of persons to be foster carers are social workers, have experience of foster care and family placement work and are trained in assessment. (NMS 23.6)
- Ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the training, support and development standards have been attained within 12 months of approval, and that specific training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. (NMS 20.3 and 20.8)
- Ensure that a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring the activities of the service. This includes any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service: to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. (NMS 25.1 and 25.2)
- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. (NMS 19.2)

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

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

Most children and young people have lived happily and thrived in secure long-term, well-planned placements. However, not all have always felt safe and at ease living with their foster carers. Too many of the children and young people have had to leave placements because the care has not been good enough, or foster carers were not kind. A higher rate of children and young people than the national average had placements that ended. Some care has mirrored the abuse in their families of origin. The registered manager has reviewed placement stability across all placements and is taking forward actions to improve the outcomes for children and young people. Children and young people who contributed to the inspection said they were happy, felt part of their foster family and were doing well. One child said: 'I feel welcome all the time. I can talk to them when I am upset.' Children and young people also said that they wanted more freedom on the internet, more pocket money and to be left alone by social workers to feel normal.

The agency works cooperatively to implement local authority placement plans, including progressing plans for permanence where this is identified. Children and young people get support to take up play therapy, child mental health services, and now have opportunities for direct work with the agency's children's participation worker. For example, children who may be at risk of sexual exploitation now have a trusted adult to whom they can talk about body image, emotional resilience, and healthy emotional and sexual relationships. There are now trips, group activities, celebrations of Black history month, and further plans for regular gatherings with children and young people to focus on health promotion and safety. Where children and young people want to, they can stay with their foster carers through 'staying put' arrangements. A foster carer said, 'They have two families. This door will always be open.'

Children and young people go on holiday with their foster carers; they develop new hobbies; get the support they need to go to after school clubs, and learn how to keep themselves safe. They have support to keep in touch with their birth families where this is part of the plan and they are accepted within foster carers' wider family networks. They help children and young people to keep a positive sense of their heritage, despite early childhood trauma. The agency has managed to provide good matching for children and young people's ethnicity. One foster carer recalled a child of mixed race, noticing his foster carer's skin for the first time: 'we're the same colour.'

Children and young people get effective help to succeed at school and think about university or alternative paths to work. The agency works well with foster carers and schools where children and young people are struggling. The agency is clear that their focus is the child. A placing social worker spoke extremely positively about the experience of foster children: 'Foster carers are, 'Doing an amazing job with them.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

Aspects of foster carer assessment, review, and training are not yet good. The agency has already identified, through panel feedback, that the quality of assessments has not always been consistently good. Managers are already taking action to rectify this. Independent assessors employed by the agency have not had training in assessments. The office support systems have not supported the processes for quality assessments of foster carers, timeliness and decision making at annual review. There are delays in annual reviews for foster carers. Some annual reviews do not include a proper decision made by the appropriate senior manager within the organisation. The registered manager has not referred the final decision about suitability for all annual reviews to the agency's decision maker and has conducted reviews in isolation.

Not enough foster carers have achieved the training, support and development standards in foster care within one year. Although a good broad range of training is available relevant to the needs of children and young people in the agency, it is not always clear from foster carer records how the agency has filled the gap for some foster parents, until training can be delivered.

When necessary, the registered manager has recognised poor foster parent practice, taken decisive action to review foster carer suitability and has referred these to the agency decision maker who has made clear, unequivocal decisions to terminate registration. This clarity is a strength.

The service has not recruited many foster carers this year and has not placed any new children or young people. A strategic plan to build the agency is not yet showing results, though managers say the capacity is set to grow with more foster carers in 'the pipeline.' Foster carers and agency staff have recently shared planning about future placement direction towards the profile needed by placing authorities. The manager is clear that they will not recruit foster carers who are not suitable and they will not place a child if they cannot support needs. Foster carers appreciate this careful motivation: 'Ethically they are doing something very, very good.'

Support for foster carers, through regular supervisory visits and email, is good. Foster carers say they can always get hold of their supervising social worker, even out of hours. A foster carer said the agency have, 'been fantastic, supportive.' The agency also gives challenge to foster carers to improve practice where necessary, or to try new strategies with children and young people. Foster carers report that they have good training and have really enjoyed the recent theoretical training in the 'secure base' model. The agency provides support through respite for foster children with other foster carers where this meets children's needs too.

A strong emphasis on therapeutic approaches and psychological thinking, supported by a consultant therapist, gives staff and foster parents an increasingly clear and supportive framework for their work with children and young people. One foster carer described how she told her foster child: 'your beginning is not your end. We

have promised him, we're going to hang onto him.' Children and young people respond to this commitment and care.

A social worker spoke of her positive experience of placement beginnings: 'link and matching very successful.' A child recalls 'I had a choice to come' to the foster home and said, 'I prefer this one' (to the last place). Foster carers feel supported and like being part of a small, family orientated agency. Foster carer described the features they thought were good: 'The matching process, support, help and advice that is given at any time.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

Generally, effective child protection systems mean that children are safe in their foster homes. However, it is not clear from recruitment records how the agency operates rigorous recruitment practice in relation to consultant therapists, for whom full checks are not available.

The manager implements interagency safeguarding procedures and liaises well with placing and host local authorities when allegations have been made. Where foster carers have harmed children and young people or been unkind to them, the agency takes action. Few children and young people have gone missing from care, or at risk of sexual exploitation, and the agency is ready to take action if so.

Foster carers and staff talked about how the secure base approach has 'shifted' their thinking about behaviour and the impact of children and young people's previous experiences. Where restraint is used, the agency ensures that there is follow-up and talks to the foster carers about alternative responses, while they source formal training. Foster carers have been impressed that the manager has visited after serious incidents. They value this input.

Foster carers talk with children and young people, as would a good parent, about risks in the community or at school and online. Foster carers say they have the information they need to keep foster children and young people safe and get advice at support groups, supervision and agency meetings, as well as in their training. Risk assessments, involvement in care planning and communication with placing authorities ensure that there is support to reduce children and young people's vulnerabilities. Regular supervisory visits, including unannounced, mean that the agency is well informed about the daily experience of children and young people in any fostering household. One child said: 'This place is very safe and they look after me very well.'

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

The responsible individual recognises that the agency has not developed as hoped since registration and that it requires longer term support to be sustainable. The agency has had a pattern of growth and retrenchment since registration. The line management relationship between the registered manager and service manager has been problematic.

There is a raft of organisational internal management reports, national safeguarding reviews and local discussions and Ofsted has no concerns about current practice with children and young people. However, there has been no formal review of the quality of care sent to Ofsted or to partners. There is not an agency level evaluation of safeguarding and child protection practice, after an event, to inform agency developments and improve wider foster carer and staff practice. For example, 'lessons learnt' identified in meetings after incidents or disruptions are not drawn into any formal agency review of the quality of care that is then shared with Ofsted.

The manager has not had advanced safeguarding training at a level commensurate with her responsibilities, but the organisation does offer this and has identified this training uptake as an issue within its national safeguarding review. Staff say that they feel well supported and well trained. However, staff supervision records are not always accurate: some documents appear to be duplicates with changed dates. In practice, manager and social work and support staff talk closely each day, sharing an office.

The agency is sufficiently staffed and resourced. Staff turnover has not been significant. The manager is confident and provides calm leadership. She has been unavoidably absent for over 28 days, both planned and in an emergency: the registered person has not notified Ofsted of this. This managerial absence has had an impact on administration and delay in conducting internal annual reviews. The sole social worker is well qualified and has worked consistently to support foster carers. The child's practitioner enables a better experience for children and young people through creative and responsive direct work. An experienced therapist delivers professional support to staff and foster parents.

The agency is committed to children and young people's participation and has an active strategy to deliver this, prompted in part by suggestions made by foster carers. The team is developing a thoughtful, reflective approach under the direction of the registered manager and the therapist.

Partnership working is successful and foster carers are an active part of the team, including at the agency's annual general meeting. One independent reviewing officer said, 'Foster carer is superb.' 'Communication with foster carer is excellent.' Another social worker described: 'A positive experience for the local authority. Happy to place again.'

The agency and the organisation recognise their strengths and also recognise areas for improvement. The manager said they: 'Need to grow but safely.' One foster carer summed up the strengths of the agency: 'they care about us and make sure we are caring for the child.'

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children, 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.