

Community Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Community Foster Care is an independent foster care agency, established to provide professional foster care for Looked After Children (LAC). It was set up as a limited company in 1999 and is also a registered charity and not-for-profit community business. The agency has a board of trustees that meets regularly to ensure it fulfils the responsibilities of a registered charity.

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

The fostering service provides a good level of care for children and young people, many of whom have complex and challenging needs. With a few exceptions, placements are stable and long term. Young people report that they feel safe and well cared for.

Children and young people make good progress educationally and in the development of their social and behavioural skills. This is achieved in part by the agencies commitment to support young people's education and to provide good therapeutic care. Young people enjoy a large range of activities in the local community with the support of the Placement Support Workers who give 'hands on' support to carers.

Fostering households are stable and few leave to join other agencies. This is due to the good levels of support they receive from the supervising social workers and the Placement Support Workers. They report that they have good access to training and

that regular carer's forum meetings help them to very much feel part of the 'fostering family'. Carers are actively involved in placement planning and review. Their views are taken into account with regard to service development.

Supervising social workers and Placement Support Workers feel well managed, trained and supported. The acting manager and the responsible individual are actively involved in the day to day running of the service and practitioners feel that they are visible, available and approachable.

The proposed registered manager is required to achieve a management qualification. Also, it is recommended that the agency should only suggest prospective foster carers to local authorities in terms of their capacity to look after children in a safe and responsible way; and there should always be members of the fostering panel that reflect the diversity of foster carers and the children they care for.

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

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency provides placing authorities and young people with full and descriptive accounts of their fostering households which describe in good detail the foster home and the people that the young person is proposed to be placed with. This informs young people about their futures and enables them to make choices about proposed placements. The agency ensures that carers are given all the available detailed information about the young person to be placed and this helps young people and carers to be appropriately matched. The majority of carers are approved to take emergency, short term or long term placements. The overwhelming number of placements made are stable and long term. However, disruption has occurred when more challenging young people have been placed with inexperienced carers in an emergency situation and when no other placements were available. On the rare occasion that this did occur it did not ensure the best outcome for the young person.

Placement Support Workers (PSW) meet regularly with young people individually and in groups to ensure that they can participate in, and have access to social, leisure and recreational resources within the community. This introduces them to opportunities that otherwise might not be available to them and provides them with good life experiences. The PSW's also coordinate consultation forums for young people which gives them a voice in service provision and development. Additionally, young people are provided with comprehensive written and online information on how to raise concerns or complaints about their care.

Foster carers report that they have regular and ongoing training in all key areas of their work and that supervision and support is of a high standard. Several of the carers have skills in working with children and young people with disabilities and they report that they are given additional training in this regard. One carer commented, "Training is ongoing and if I ask for specific individual training they provide it for us even if it is at a cost to the company." This helps to provide young people with a level of care that ensures good outcomes.

The agency employs the services of a therapeutic agency who will conduct one to one work with individual young people when their needs are assessed as requiring additional support.

The majority of young people attend full time education and many make educational progress in relation to their starting points. The agency has good links with virtual head teachers. They ensure that personal education plans are in place for each young person and that pupil premiums are used to effectively support young people with their education. The agency employs the services of an educational adviser who has many years experience in a senior teaching capacity and who also has personal experience of foster care. All of these measures help to ensure that young people's educational needs are well supported.

Where appropriate, foster carers will promote and support young people with contact

arrangements with their birth families. Birth parents are always invited to attend their child's review meeting, unless this will be detrimental to the wellbeing of children and young people. This helps young people maintain a link to home and to keep them aware of any issues affecting their birth families.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good

Carers report that they feel they were well prepared for the fostering task and that ongoing training is always available and is promoted. They feel that they are regularly supported by the supervising social workers and the regular carer's forum meetings, and that their caring role is further supported by the PSWs who provide 'hands on' support. Additionally, carers report that their 'out of hours' support is excellent. One carer commented "They are always available to help with any concerns I have 24 hours and seven days a week. I never feel alone and have never been made to feel I am wasting their time, even when I have called in the early hours of the morning." Although respite arrangements are available for carers, few take this up preferring to maintain placement consistency for children and young people in their care.

The agency works effectively with placing authorities, schools and professional bodies who comment favourably on the good standard of care provided by the agency. Carers actively contribute to young people's care and educational reviews. Independent reviewing officers report that placement plans are well constructed and are effectively reviewed, and that the quality of carers in this agency is good.

The fostering panel meets regularly and is independently chaired. Panel minutes identify that assessments receive a good level of scrutiny before recommendations of approval are made to the Agency Decision Maker. The panel will access medical, educational and legal expertise outside of the panel membership when this becomes necessary. There is no panel member with personal experience of being fostered, or from a black or minority ethnic group. This limits the panel's awareness of specific issues of race and exclusion.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

In questionnaire survey returns and in direct interviews young people told the inspector that they feel safe and that they know where they can go to seek help or share any concerns about their care. The agency provides young people with a range of information documentation and guides which advise them where to seek help and keep themselves safe. This includes clear descriptions of the agency complaints procedure. Additionally, the frequent meetings that take place with the PSWs and the young people's forum group meetings provide another avenue of support. Young

people also regularly meet with their placing authority social workers and independent reviewing officers who will always ask young people at reviews if they feel safe or have any concerns. The main placing authorities also have an advocacy service that young people may access.

Supervising social workers conduct at least two unannounced visits to fostering households and there are periodic health and safety checks of fostering households and annual review. Risk assessments are in place for individual young people if there are any known issues that may affect their care or wellbeing and carers are trained in methods of safe caring. Risk assessments are shared with schools and other appropriate professional groups where appropriate. The agency notifies the placing authorities and the regulatory body about any incident involving the safeguarding of children and young people. The Local Authority Safeguarding Officer (LADO) states that the agency will keep them informed about any issues of concern and will follow appropriate policy and procedure. They have no current safeguarding concerns about this agency.

The agency has a clearly written safeguarding children policy which is reviewed annually and which is known to all staff and which forms part of foster carers training. Foster carer's assessments are rigorous and will explore any concerns about potential carers and their likelihood of causing harm to young people. Appropriate recruitment and vetting procedures are followed for all foster carers, agency staff and panel members appointed and personal files for each are well ordered and up to date. Carers and managers and staff receive safeguarding training appropriate to their position and this training is regularly updated. All of these measures help to ensure that children and young people are protected from any adults who might harm them.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

The registered manager of the service has recently taken on a senior position within the agency. The management of the service is currently being undertaken by a newly appointed manager who is currently in the process of application and Suitable Person enquiries. The proposed registered manager has a professional social work qualification and has many years of experience in child care practice and in the management of a fostering service with another registered agency. However, they do not have a management qualification as required for this role.

All supervising social workers are professionally qualified and registered. The PSWs have appropriate qualifications in youth work. All report that they have good access to ongoing training, they receive regular, good quality supervision and there is a strong sense of effective team working. All management and staff undertake an

annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs.

The agency has effective working relationships with placing authorities, schools and other professional groups who comment that they provide good levels of communication and will seek additional services in order to meet children and young people's assessed needs. Reports are of a good quality and the agency is actively involved in the review of individual young people's care plans. Additionally, placing authorities make particular positive comment on the way that the agency will provide young people with activities and opportunities in the local community through the active involvement of the PSWs.

The statement of purpose and children's guides are clearly written, comprehensive and up to date. Internal monitoring and service review is timely and comprehensive. Shortfalls are identified and acted upon. These reports and reviews are conducted in consultation with young people and there is evidence that the agency will draw upon recent research to guide service development. The management conducts reviews on all key policies and procedures annually.

Effective action has been taken in regard to the requirements and recommendations of the previous inspection. The agency now verifies by telephone references from the former employers of all staff appointed. The children's guide now contains the contact details of HMCI and clearly describes the process for granting permission for young people to stay overnight with friends.

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.