

Fostering Support Group:London Office

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Lee Kirwin
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Date of last inspection 12/12/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

First established in 1989; Fostering Support Group (FSG), provides fostering services in the Kent and London area. The agency provides emergency, short and long-term foster placements for children of all ages and with a range of care needs. There are currently 26 foster carers, with a total of 25 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 is a relatively small agency, led by a caring, competent Registered Manager who has excellent oversight of the quality of care provided to children. She is visible throughout all areas of service delivery and accessible to all. This means that staff, carers and children receive individualised support which recognizes their strengths and helps stretch them in areas for learning and development.

The agency carefully matches children with their careers and places them with families who can meet their needs. Placements are stable and rarely breakdown in an unplanned way. They support children to feel welcome, settle quickly, make progress and they often stay a long time – frequently into adulthood.

Foster carers are extremely committed and genuinely love and care for the children they look after. They are resilient when faced with challenges and skilled at helping children with complex needs. They appreciate the responsive support they receive from the agency and feel, as one foster carer put it, 'there is always someone at the

end of the phone to support me’.

When children have more complex needs, foster carers receive specialist training and advice to ensure that they are able to help children stay safe and make progress.

When children are at risk through going missing or they are vulnerable to exploitation in the community, foster carers are quick to notice the dangers and they work well in partnership with others to make sure children are safe.

Children appreciate the care they experience and feel part of the family. Foster carers go the extra mile to support children to keep in touch with their families and realise how important this is for them. This means that children have a stable base from which to enjoy and rebuild family relationships.

Staff and foster carers receive regular formal supervision and have their performance appraised every 12 months. Senior managers are accessible and offer good support to the Registered Manager, but do not always provide regular formal supervision and annual appraisal. This does not have a serious impact on the quality of care because she is able to access support when needed and undertakes training to keep up to date with practice issues. Feedback from children is always used to inform foster carer’s annual reviews; but not for those of supervising social workers.

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.

None	
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Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendation(s):

Ensure that records evidence that references are validated to ensure they are authentic. (NMS 19.2)

Ensure the registered manager receives regular formal supervision and that this is recorded. (NMS 24.5)

Ensure that all staff annual appraisals take into account the views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children make good progress in all areas. They benefit from loving family placements where they feel part of the family and the wider community. This means that when there are challenges, they are able to understand that foster carers have their best interests at heart and have the same expectations for children in foster care, as they have of their own children. This also means that their voice is as important as any other member of the household and they feel listened to.

Foster carers seldom use respite carers and when they do, just like a regular family, they use extended family networks. When this is not possible, respite carers often look after children in the foster carer's home. This means that children experience consistency of care and seldom stay away from their home overnight.

Children feel positively attached to their foster carers, who help them to have contact with their own families. One child described how her foster carer frequently drives her a long distance to see her Mother and picks her up. Another said her foster carers 'are nice people' and couldn't think of anything she would want to improve about her experience of living in the family.

The agency matches children with families in order to meet their needs in terms of their culture and faith. When this is not possible carers are resourceful and take steps to ensure that children can enjoy their own cultural experiences in the home. Carers encourage children to spend time with people of their own culture and faith, in the local community.

Children often invite their friends to the home, and make them feel welcome, sometimes overnight for sleepovers. This shows that children are comfortable in the home and develop secure, positive friendships with other children. They are included in family trips and holidays and supported to pursue hobbies and have fun. They are supported to attend health appointments and encouraged to make healthy lifestyle choices.

Children feel safe in their foster homes and do not experience bullying. They know how to complain but seldom raise things that they are unhappy with. They live in stable placements, mostly long term. Behaviours which cause concern or put them at risk, reduce considerably over a relatively short space of time. They abscond less and develop more healthy routines. This helps with their education and all children are engaged in education placements and making progress.

When children are feeling unsettled or having difficulties, the agency provides extra support from mentors, a therapeutic specialist or one to one time with the agency's supervising social workers. This means that they have someone to talk to, other than their foster carer. They have a space to talk about any worries or concerns, which

helps the agency understand how children are feeling, and how best to help them.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The Registered Manager strongly promotes a child centred ethos and this is shared throughout the staff team and the foster carers. Decisions in relation to service development, recruitment and training are ethical and put the interests of children at the heart of everything the agency does.

Commissioning officers and placing social workers are very positive about the quality of care provided by the agency. They commented that the agency is 'highly professional' and offers a range of committed carers to local children with complex needs. They value the fact that the agency is rigorous in seeking full referral information and are both responsive and flexible when dealing with emergency placements. The range of placements offered is consistent with those identified in the agency's statement of purpose.

The agency places children with carers as a result of careful matching. The agency placements officer is an experienced, qualified social worker and is able to make informed assessments based upon referral information. She knows the carers well and pays close attention to their strengths and abilities when matching children. She also mindful of the wider family dynamics and considers the impact on other children in the foster home, when making placement decisions. The agency places children with agency carers only if they feel confident that carers can meet their needs.

Supervising social workers are extremely skilled and experienced in their role. They work well in partnership with other agencies. They offer constructive challenge to placing authorities and carers when this is necessary to ensure that care planning is meeting children's needs. Despite their best efforts, they are not always able to ensure that the placing authority social workers send relevant plans, such as Personal Education Plans and Looked After Children Review notes. They attend all significant meetings and record their own notes and this ensures that the care provided is consistent with children's relevant plans.

The panel chair is an experienced, competent person and panel members contribute a range of views and areas of expertise. They make approval recommendations based upon thorough assessments and challenge appropriately if information is incomplete. Foster carers are positive about the assessment process and commented that it was 'stringent, but asked all the right questions'. They went on to say that the experience helped them find out more about themselves and helped them prepare well for the realities of the fostering role.

The agency is experiencing some challenges in recruiting new foster carers and taking steps to address this. The Registered Manager sets a high bar for the quality

of applicants and is keen to ensure that the pressure to recruit does not compromise the quality of care. Foster carers are committed to the agency and feel it is improving. One foster carer remarked that 'it is the best it's ever been'. Another said 'it's the best I have ever known it'.

Foster carers feel well supported by the agency. They have regular supervision and training and feel that their supervising social workers are very helpful. The agency is very responsive and carers feel able to approach all staff for direct support, including the registered manager. Out of hours support is effective and supervising social workers provide support and advice whatever time of day or night. One foster carer said she really valued this support when things get tough and said that she is 'never left alone to pick up the pieces'. This means that crisis can be contained safely and that foster carers are able to work through difficulties that might otherwise cause placements to break down.

Foster carers undergo annual reviews to assess their suitability for the role. The supervising social workers provide detailed reports to inform decision making. They highlight the strengths of each carer and identify areas for development. The agency also considers the views of children and placing authority social workers. This ensures that foster carers get a clear sense of how their work is experienced by others, especially children. They appreciate this and particularly value the experience as one which recognizes their hard work and helps them learn.

Foster carers demonstrate exceptional commitment and genuine love and care towards children. They are able to look past challenging behaviours to see the qualities of children and they hold them in positive regard in all circumstances. They work hard to see each child as an individual and provide care that is thoughtful and considered. One foster carer, when describing how she had overcome some challenges for a child she is caring for, said 'he stole my heart'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The key strengths already identified in this report make a significant contribution to ensuring children are safe. In particular, the skills and experience of the staff, including the registered manager, the commitment shown by foster carers and; that children have a sense of belonging in their foster families.

The agency complete comprehensive risk assessments for all children, these are done at the point of referral and regularly reviewed. This means that children are matched with their welfare and the welfare of others in mind. Where children have more complex needs or learning difficulties, they are placed with experienced carers who are suitably trained and supported.

Most children do not go missing, if they do, foster carers are proactive in trying to find them. They work effectively in partnership with other agencies in line with agreed procedures. If children frequently go missing, the carers are alert to the associated dangers, such as, risks of exploitation. The agency acts upon concerns and strategies are put in place to protect and prevent harm occurring. As a result, children either significantly reduce or stop going missing. Foster carers are alert to potential dangers posed by use of the internet and social media. They ensure that content is filtered to prevent unsuitable material being accessed. They also monitor children closely and take action if any concerns arise in relation to e-safety.

Foster carers undertake a range of safeguarding training and this means that they recognize potential risks and know how to respond to them. The agency provides 24 hour support from experienced supervising social workers. This protects children from harm; and foster carers are never alone when faced with concerns for children's safety.

Supervising social workers regularly undertake health and safety checks on foster homes and quickly remedy any hazards. All foster carers undertake first aid training and work within safer care agreements, meaning children and foster families are safe.

Staff supervisions address safeguarding issues for each child and supervising social workers consult with the registered manager where there are specific concerns or areas that may indicate risks. Clear action plans identify steps to involve partner agencies in support strategies and safety plans to manage risks.

The agency employs a therapeutic specialist to provide support and advice to carers faced with complex behaviours that are beyond their skills or experience. This means that children who may be at risk due to mental health problems can receive support and expert assessment to ensure they are safe. The agency holds special interest groups that help foster carers understand a range of issues, such as, the impact of loss and trauma on children or dealing with children on the autistic spectrum. This helps them develop informed strategies to cope with presenting behaviours and help children make progress.

The agency recruits suitably qualified staff in line with safe recruitment practices. They vet all employees through the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) to ensure they are suitable to work with vulnerable children. They obtain references from previous employers but do not always verify these by a follow up call or checks. Given that all other checks are completed and regularly updated, this does not present a significant risk that staff are less than suitable for the role.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

The Registered Manager is a qualified social worker with considerable experience as a manager and a practitioner within the fostering sector. She leads a stable, highly effective, competent team who work collaboratively with her to deliver a shared, child centred ethos.

She is practice led in her style of management and has an in depth knowledge of the children and carers in the agency. She is calm and considered in her approach. Staff appreciate this and feel that she is accessible and supportive. She is able to recognize the strengths of the staff team and takes an appreciative approach to giving constructive feedback in order to address development areas. This means that the staff feel valued and have clear direction when any shortfalls in performance are identified.

She provides staff with regular supervision and appraisals which identify tasks, development plans and also pays attention to staff well-being. Supervising social workers appreciate the support they receive; one commented that she feels 'someone is always there for support'. The team meet regularly for reflective practice discussions. This provides a reflective space to explore the emotional impact of the work, share experiences and explore practice issues. This models good social work practice and ensures that staff can examine issues in depth and feel connected to the team.

The agency holds a series of events for foster children to have fun and enjoy themselves, this includes trips out, activities and an annual achievements event that celebrates success for children and carers. Foster carers meet regularly with agency staff, including the manager. This provides a forum for the agency to discuss practice issues and case discussion. It also allows the agency to make use of foster carer feedback to inform service development plans.

The Registered Manager has good oversight of the service and regularly monitors the quality of care. She uses this information to identify continuous improvement work and to set clear development targets. She works effectively in partnership with other agencies and addresses safeguarding concerns promptly, in line with procedures, using a multi-disciplinary approach. The agency delivers care which is consistent with meeting the needs of children as identified in the agencies statement of purpose.

The agency has a keen focus on the needs of children from different cultural or faith backgrounds. If they are unable to match children in this regard, carers make every effort to celebrate diversity make sure that children receive the support they need to meet any cultural needs.

The registered manager works well with the agency decision maker to ensure careful monitoring of the recruitment and review of foster carers. She has access to support and advice from child protection specialists when required. This means that there is no risk of her feeling isolated in the role and she always has a manager to talk to

who has extensive social care experience and training. Her line managers provide day to day support and advice, but she does not receive regular formal supervision or appraisal.

The provider and responsible individual are in tune with the child centred values and objectives of the service. They provide significant investment to ensure that the Registered Manger has the means to expand the agency and maintain the quality of care.

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.