

Caldecott Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Helen Lee
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency provides support to 22 children and young people, mainly in the Kent area. The agency has 16 foster households. It provides a range of fostering opportunities for children and young people from birth to 18 years. In addition, 'Staying Put' arrangements are in place for young people to remain with carers beyond their 18th birthday. The fostering agency has an office in Ashford, Kent. Specialist psychotherapist and counselling services are commissioned by the agency to support young people with more complex needs.

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 provides a good level of care for children. The provider has taken suitable action to monitor the quality of care and rectify previous management and operational shortfalls. A new Registered Manager, appointed in June 2015, ensures that suitable management arrangements are now in place. She demonstrates a meticulous management style and ensures that all fostering activity is brought back in line with regulations, standards and best practice.

Children benefit from dynamic, professional foster carers who take pride in their role and strongly advocate on children's behalf. Children are flourishing in enriching placements which provide them with a stable base. They are growing in confidence and maturity which increases their self-esteem.

Young people said: 'they are brilliant foster carers, I enjoy being here, they are down to earth and know how to help me. They always have my interests. I am treated as a

family member'; 'they are always there to talk to me and advise me the best they can. I wouldn't change anything about them' and 'my family now consists of two awesome parents, amazing sisters and a crazy brother and it's so awesome. I honestly don't know where I would be without them'.

Children and young people feel safe and protected by foster carers. There is not an issue with children going missing. The agency appropriately addresses allegations and concerns about standards of care to make certain that children receive effective emotional, physical and psychological support.

Strong relationships develop between children and their carer's as they feel happy, well supported and valued members of the family. Foster carers are considered an integral part of the fostering team and their views and opinions are respected.

Children benefit from an effective, enthusiastic leadership and management team, who focus on providing a personalised child-centred service. Leaders and managers are building on the strengths of the agency and are purposefully tackling areas for further improvement. As one foster carer stated ' I see things are improving and that can only benefit the young people we care for as well as ourselves. I know that if I have concerns I can voice them freely and know that they are taken seriously'. The new Registered Manager takes a more strategic approach to quality assurance; the service has a very good capacity to further improve based on the comprehensive audit and improvement plan already completed.

Overall children receive an good service. Two requirements are made to ensure panel functioning and recording is more robust. One requirement is made regarding foster carer training.

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.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the panel makes a written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 24 (2)).	31/03/2016
Ensure that when considering what recommendations to make the panel (a) considers and takes into account all the information passed to it in accordance with regulation 26,27 or 28 (as the case may be), (b) requests the fostering service provider obtains any other relevant information or to provide such other assistance as the fostering panel	31/03/2016

<p>considers necessary, and (c) obtains such legal advice or medical advice it considers necessary (Regulation 25 (2)).</p>	
<p>Provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. In particular, ensure all carers complete core training (Regulation 17(1)).</p>	<p>30/06/2016</p>

Recommendations

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

ensure that the fostering service has a clear statement of purpose which is reflected in any policies, procedures and guidance. In particular that it includes clear timescales and evaluation of practises (NMS 16.1)

ensure that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. This is in relation to all of the agency's records including all information about the child, placement planning, risk assessments and complaints made to panel (NMS 26.2)

provide appropriate training on safer caring for all members of the foster household, including young people of sufficient age and understanding (NMS 20.9)

ensure that records, where a child goes missing, detail action taken, circumstances of the child’s return, any reasons given by the child and any action taken in light of those reasons (NMS 5.10)

ensure the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are given information about their foster carers, how they will be cared for and their new home; this helps them settle and reduces anxieties. Profiles of the foster families are brightly coloured, informative and easy to follow. Children are welcomed as part of the family and therefore have opportunities to experience good-quality family life and positive parenting. They develop strong bonds with their foster carers and as a result show increased emotional resilience.

Children are thriving in placements which provides them with a dependable and safe base. They are growing in confidence, autonomy and maturity which increases their self-esteem. Foster carers provide the length of care necessary and this includes children remaining under Special Guardianship Orders or through an adoption or permanence arrangement. This further enables children to feel secure and have improved emotional wellbeing. The majority of children and young people who move on are tracked by the agency and remain in contact with either the carers or agency staff. This provides continuity and a grounding for those young people.

Children express their wishes and feelings and know how to complain. They influence their day-to-day care and contribute to foster carer's annual reviews. The agency has a young people's engagement plan underway to further involve children in decision making which will enable the service to continue to develop in a child centred manner. Planned events include a young people's group to discuss the core skills they want a carer to have, a young people's panel and delivering training to potential foster carers. During the inspection young people contributed pictures and images for use within the children's guide and company website. This plan ensures children's wishes, feelings and views influence the agency's continual improvement.

Children receive effective emotional, physical and psychological support. Foster carers manage children's health needs and actively promote a healthy life style. This includes closely liaising with health professionals, enabling children to have a better quality of life. Examples include young people getting the right help regarding hearing difficulties, significant reduction of skin ailments, children being able to smile for the first time after having dental support, reduction in sleeping difficulties, reduction in using medication and improved diets. Medical staff positively comment on children's progress and their improved health outcomes.

Children are making positive educational progress from their starting points. The vast majority of children and young people of school age are in full time education with a significant number achieving 100% attendance. Young people are excelling in college and in preparation for university. Generally children are in line with their peers of the same abilities. Some now attend school after significant gaps or refusals prior to placement. As one young person said 'I was kicked out of school, I moved in with (foster carer) which made everything click into place and I'm now back in school and getting all the qualifications I can'. Carers proactively support children to achieve their educational potential and progress their learning.

Children benefit from arrangements that enable them to maintain relationships with relatives. The agency enthusiastically promotes and facilitates contact between children and their birth families. They work well with groups of brothers and/or sisters and where possible siblings are placed together. Friendships with peers are encouraged and children are able to welcome their friends into their home and on occasion are able to have sleepovers.

Children and young people engage in activities they enjoy including youth clubs, dancing, swimming, skating, citizenship classes, driving lessons, brownies, army cadets, football club, rangers, horse riding and bike riding. One child said that they most enjoyed 'going to the local skate park with my mates'. They are valued in the families and included in their activities and holidays.

Foster carers work with young people to prepare them for living independently. Young people are also able to remain in placement on 'Staying Put' arrangements. The agency now has a 'steps to independence' needs assessment. This has effectively supported a young person by lengthening the original timescales the placing authority expected them to reach independence by. Therefore helping ensure a smoother transition into adult life.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Placement matching systems are now effective, ensuring children and young people are only placed where foster carers are able to meet their needs. Foster carers' state the agency does not put pressure on them to take placements. The agency has held workshops for carers regarding the manner of referrals and the matching process. The agency actively works with local authorities to ensure that full information is always shared with foster carers to enable effective placement planning. Where this is not available, the agency pursue this information. Placement breakdowns only occur where childrens' or foster carers' safety is compromised. The continuity of care experienced by the majority of children and young people helps them to achieve positive outcomes.

Foster carers are able to meet the complex needs of the vast majority of children. Foster carers benefit from a structured preparation process. This enables them to obtain an in-depth understanding of fostering. The assessment process is much more rigorous and the quality of reports is continually improving. There is a marked effort to provide greater analysis and fully address competencies and applicant's capacity to care. This is further enhanced by an improved quality assurance procedure implemented by the new Registered Manager.

The vast majority of carers and their families value the support provided by the agency. They benefit from regular supervisory visits which now have a clearer format

and remit. Foster carers receive the support and supervision they need in order to care properly for children placed with them. An effective out of hours service gives carers' confidence that there is always someone available to offer support and guidance.

A new respite policy and process ensures that the focus remains on the child's needs and wishes; this strengthens the information sharing between the carer and respite carer. The agency is clear regarding its delegated authority policy. This enables the foster carers to form and maintain positive working relationships with parents and other significant adults for the child or young person.

100% of carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards (TSDS). The agency provides a variety of useful ad hoc training which equips the majority of foster carers well to meet the needs of children. Previous management oversight of training had not been robust. This has led to gaps for carers regarding core training in the range of fostering tasks. Some foster carers and staff have not undertaken sufficient training in key areas such as missing from home, delegated authority, health and managing allegations. This means they may not be up-to-date with changes in statutory guidance and best practice. Conversely, there are pockets of high quality bespoke training for some individual children's needs such as self-harm. The new Registered Manager has commissioned a comprehensive training programme for 2016. Carers training now has a higher priority within the carers review process where it is scrutinised and if shortfalls are identified actions are put in place to remedy.

The panel has not been effective or robustly challenging and there have been a number of occasions where it was evident that the panel lacked working knowledge of the regulations. This was also further escalated by a lack of robustness in the agency decision-making process. The new manager has overhauled the panel's central list and rectified the shortfalls. For example, by recruiting a new vice chair and agency decision-maker, completing panel appraisals, developing a panel induction and recruitment process as well as clear job descriptions and handbooks. Quality assurance meetings and reports now take place between the chair, Registered Manager and the agency decision-maker. Additionally the Registered Manager has reviewed the administrative systems to ensure that the assessor is responsible for gathering all of the information before sending the report to panel.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. They are supported to engage in in everyday tasks in order to develop a sense of responsibility. Carers' help them to understand how to make safe choices and learn about the world around them. Children and young people talk to their carers about their worries and concerns and receive the support that they need. The agency has in place a 'placing alongside' risk

assessment which upholds that the current children in placement are at the forefront of any matching considerations.

All foster carers complete a household safe caring policy alongside individual children's ones. These provide clear guidance for foster carers to provide a safe environment. The guidance stresses the uniqueness of each child and their different life experiences. Foster carers own these policies and the majority are robust ensuring safe boundaries while allowing flexibility in the care provided to each child. Agency staff undertake unannounced visits to foster carers' homes and now indicate whether the child was seen; this is monitored by the manager.

There is not an issue with children going missing from care currently. Since the last inspection in 2012 there have only been 17 missing episodes which relate to 8 young people. The manager reviewed the missing from home process and has implemented a monitoring log, risk assessments and clearer links to the matching criteria. She has improved relationships with the police. This enables staff to support carers to understand the risks and vulnerabilities of young people who go missing. Foster carers work closely with young people to identify triggers. Episodes of missing and absent are infrequent because young people are stable and content within their placements. Return visits for young people who go missing are inconsistent and there is no provision in place where local authorities fail to provide this service and analyse the information gleaned from them, which could be pivotal to the young person's care. This leaves young people vulnerable.

Foster carers establish effective relationships with children and young people. Evidence of this is that there are currently no children or young people experiencing bullying, at risk of sexual exploitation or at risk of radicalisation. There are also no restraints used with any child. Young people choose to make healthier choices changing previous behaviours such as smoking and self-harming. Significant progress has been made by one young person who said 'I moved 4 hrs away from everything I knew to these awesome people. At first I was depressed Anyways these people have helped me recover and they are so nice and caring. I class them as family. It's nice to live with their children too. Even if we aren't related by blood, they are my siblings. They are always there for me and look after me. They cheer me up and I love hanging out with them'.

Foster carers demonstrate a sound awareness of the procedure relating to managing allegations. Carers are assertive when needed and will use complaints procedures. One complaint was made in the last year, which has been investigated. The complainant has been kept informed of the progress and outcome.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A new Registered Manager was appointed to the agency in June 2015. Children and

young people benefit from leadership and management arrangements which are now highly effective and robust. Her detailed, analytical and comprehensive improvement plan has steered the agency from entrenched shortfalls in practice across the agency to a focus on continually improving outcomes for children and the overall service. The manager has a strategic approach to quality assurance and the capacity of staff to improve. She demonstrates a thorough management approach to ensure all fostering activity is consistent with regulations, standards and best practice.

This is now an agency where leaders and managers learn from events and reflect on issues. The Responsible Individual's commitment to the manager's drive for improvement is extremely evident. He understands the importance of rigorous monitoring, which will enable the agency to continue to provide good outcomes for children. The manager monitors and reviews children's experiences which staff are knowledgeable about. An information technology system has been commissioned to enable the tracking of children's progress and produce data as needed. This is currently undertaken manually by the manager. Various other auditing tools are used such as random carer file inspections and deep dive reviews. One foster carer stated 'I am fully aware that [the agency] have begun the work to implement and update procedures, to demonstrate best practice and fulfil the regulations and I feel more secure in that knowledge'.

Children benefit from a staff team experienced in residential direct work with children. As one young person said 'she's lovely, really helpful, firm but fair and I need that!'. The manager is aware of the strengths and deficits of the team. Staff now have team meetings to aid practice cohesion which looks at specific areas including safeguarding. Staff also benefit from practice meetings looking at research and critical reflection skills. Their supervision takes place monthly and records demonstrate challenge to practice when necessary. Appraisals have also taken place and highlight with staff areas that need to be improved.

Children benefit from having their own age-appropriate guides, which help them make sense of the fostering experience and details external parties they can contact if they have concerns. Children and young people have all stated that the support they receive is 'fantastic – but don't tell them!'.

Foster carers have free access to independent information, advice, support and external professional expertise, such as legal advice, through the Fostering Network and links with Foster Talk. Carers are seen as professionals, not only by the agency, but also by other professionals working with the child or young person.

The agency's records are unstructured, difficult to find and track and often unevaluated. Records need to be simplified to enable children and young people to see their own progress now and in the future. They also need to be dated. The agency is financially viable with clear oversight from the Responsible Individual. Business continuity plans are in place and office premises have sufficient space for staff, meetings and training. The electronically held information and paper files are appropriately secure.

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.