

Capstone Foster Care (South East) Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspectors	Melissa McMillan, Mark Blesky
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Registered person	Capstone Foster Care (South East) Limited
Registered manager	Post Vacant
Responsible individual	Ms Marcella Denis
Date of last inspection	25/05/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

Capstone Foster Care (South East) Limited is based in Dartford, Kent and provides a wide range of placements for children and young people. These include emergency, bridging, assessment, short term, long term and parent and child placements.

There are currently 228 carers approved by the agency providing placements for 272 children and young people. There are currently 11 young people in staying put arrangements.

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**

Capstone Foster Care has an established record of providing safe and stable placements to children in which their needs are met through warm, nurturing and often lasting relationships with their carers. In the past three years some 700 children and young people have used the service; unplanned endings are relatively infrequent (approximately 4.5%) and carers have benefitted from bespoke support to help stabilise placements that are under pressure.

The recruitment of foster carers has successfully drawn on carers from diverse communities who are able to offer good matches to children. However, the panel process to determine the suitability of carers has not always been sufficiently rigorous, or challenging enough of the foster care assessments made. Managers recognised this issue last year and a new and highly experienced panel chair was appointed towards the end of 2015. Improvements have since been made, but only

in the three months prior to this inspection. Foster carers are appropriately skilled and are directly involved in decision making about the children in their care. They are empowered to fulfil their parenting role, within the appropriate supervisory and legal framework. The training and supervision of carers has been effective in supporting stable placements in challenging circumstances. However, the detail of children's individual needs is not always reflected in carers' individual training records and some carers have not completed core training. Carers do not routinely have or use the agency's risk assessment documentation, a few of which were not retained in the carers' homes, although the day-to-day management of risk is explored appropriately with supervising social workers.

Leadership of the agency has areas of strength alongside some areas for improvement. The scale of the task is immense, however systems are effective in ensuring that managers and placing authorities are kept informed. Monitoring is extensive at the individual child level; it is being developed further to ensure improved cumulative data is available in the future. There has been no Ofsted approved registered manager in post since May 2015. A registered manager designate has been in post since June 2015 but he has not completed his registration application quickly enough. This has not impacted on children's care.

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
The Children's Guide must include the email address of the Chief Inspector. (Regulation 3(3)(c))	19/05/2016
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring: all risk assessments and safe caring policies are of an adequate quality and are implemented on every occasion; health and safety checks and checks of the foster home are robust to identify and act on safeguarding concerns; supervision is used effectively to monitor carers' practice and to identify and act on safeguarding concerns; any changes in the fostering household are assessed including how this change may impact on the placement and the risk to the child or young person; and any concerns regarding carers' practice are investigated thoroughly including external involvement where</p>	19/05/2016

relevant.	
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 13 (1))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring that the agency's policy on restraint is implemented correctly to ensure carers receive appropriate training in the use of restraint and to ensure that there are clear behaviour management plans in place.</p>	19/04/2016
<p>The fostering service provider must implement a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 16 (2) (a))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to establishing a system to obtain information on children and young people's starting points and to monitor their progress and educational achievement to evidence how the agency is supporting children and young people to achieve their academic potential.</p>	19/05/2016
<p>The fostering service provider must 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. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to ensuring carers receive training tailored for the needs of children placed.</p>	19/05/2016
<p>The fostering panel must oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 25 (4) (b))</p> <p>This is with specific reference to making sure there is robust exploration of any gaps or potential areas for development that are apparent in assessments before making recommendations about an applicant's suitability to foster.</p>	19/05/2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that when reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination,

the decision maker should consider Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin) (The Children Act: Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, paragraph 5.40, page 46).

- Ensure that, after an episode of missing, when a child is found, they are offered an independent return interview. This should be an in-depth interview and is normally best carried out by an independent person (ie, someone not involved in caring for the child) who is trained to carry out these interviews and is able to follow-up any actions that emerge. (Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014, Paragraph 32, page 14).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people are supported to develop strong attachments with their carers and have the opportunity to gain a positive experience of family life. Many children and young people remain with their carers for some years, often converting to 'staying-put' arrangements from the age of 18, which provides them with support and consistency in their early adult life. Carers are committed to the children and young people they support and aim to provide stability and permanence. There are examples of carers doing more than would normally be expected of them, for example, to ensure groups of brothers and sisters remain together, while in other cases children have been adopted by their carers.

Children and young people are encouraged to develop their own identities and have hobbies and interests. Carers support children and young people to attend clubs, classes and events, to try new things and extend their social network. Carers encourage children and young people's friendships and provide opportunities for them to meet and spend time together. They are able to develop their independence skills through completing household tasks and budgeting in preparation for adult life. Older young people's pathway plans are promoted by the agency and additional support is provided where this is needed. For example, three years ago the agency set up and funded the 'Capstone Care Leavers Trust', which is a charity that provides grants to care leavers in England and Wales. Care leavers living with Capstone foster carers can apply for a grant if they meet the relevant eligibility criteria. The agency has also embraced 'staying put' arrangements, where practical, ensuring that young people do not have to live independently until they are ready. Children and young people are an integral part of their foster families and are involved in celebrations and holidays.

Children and young people have good attendance at school. They enjoy appropriate educational provision and 98.5% are routinely accessing this. The very small number who do not currently have a full-time educational placement are supported to access this by their carers and by the agency through appropriate challenge and work with placing social workers and local authority virtual head teachers. However, the current systems in place to establish children and young people's academic progress are reliant on information arising from individual reviews. This information does not provide a broad view of performance across all children who live with Capstone carers. The agency recognises this and is introducing the use of an 'outcomes tracker' which will be able to demonstrate at the individual and agency-wide level how it helps and supports children and young people to fulfil their potential, and the outcomes they achieve. Children and young people's health needs are met through very good uptake of routine appointments and the strong support of committed carers. There are positive examples of significant health improvements promoted through this care. However, some oversights were noted; for example, a young

person's risk assessment did not detail their allergies under health needs. A scheduled dental appointment was missed and the agency, local authority and looked after children's nurse were not informed at the time.

Children and young people make good progress from their starting points. Their social skills and behaviour improve and they make good progress in their education. Where children and young people display challenging behaviour or go missing, the agency gives them and their carers helpful support. Carers and supervising social workers work closely with the placing local authorities and put effective strategies in place. Some carers do not complete written records on the child or young person's well-being. This hinders the agency's ability to monitor the child or young person's progress or ensure that their welfare is being promoted.

Children and young people are encouraged to share their views during consultation events. The agency produces well-formatted information, including a children's guide and case studies, which give examples of the range and diversity of practice.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency recruits a range of carers to support children with varying needs. They successfully reflect the ethnic mix of placements required in the geographical areas covered. Children and young people are supported to develop relationships with their carers, feel comfortable and relaxed with them and become part of the family. In the majority of cases, carers support children and young people to have contact with their birth families, and children maintain a sense of identity and belonging. However, there has been an instance when the carer has placed their needs above the need for the child to maintain relationships with their family and their contact arrangements.

Carers and supervising social workers advocate on behalf of children and young people and liaise regularly with children's social workers. They attend children's planning meetings, reviews and parents evenings. Where necessary carers have taken action to challenge professionals to ensure children and young people receive the support they need, such as their educational entitlement or to ensure children have access to specialist support from child and adolescent mental health services. However, the agency does not always obtain vital information from the placing authority such as placement agreements, care plans, reviews, consents or agreements in relation to delegated authority. This means that carers may not be clear about what support they are to provide and this has the potential to cause delays in obtaining permissions for activities or health treatments.

In some cases, the information submitted to the fostering panel (which advises on the suitability of foster carers and placements) has been of poor quality or inaccurate. Some annual reviews have not evidenced or emphasised deficits in carers' practice, for example, where carers' attendance at training and support

groups has been insufficient, or where foster carer's written records have been incorrectly completed. Some social workers presenting cases have been ill prepared and unable to answer questions satisfactorily. Required checks on carers have not always been undertaken and there have been incomplete elements in some assessments or reviews of carers. Panel has previously not always assertively challenged such omissions and some carers have been recommended for approval when gaps remained in their applications. A new chair has been appointed who is now addressing these issues and panel practice is improved. However, concerns regarding the information submitted to panel and the robustness of subsequent decision making has been a weakness through much of this inspection period.

Currently, the decision makers do not explicitly evidence their consideration of the 'Hofstetter v LB Barnet and IRM [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin)', as recommended by statutory guidance. As a result, the evidence supporting their decision making in relation to approval of prospective foster carers does not fully demonstrate adherence to good practice, nor is the reasoning sufficiently clear.

Once approved, carers receive the required announced monthly visit from their supervising social worker and have opportunities to attend support groups. However, attendance at support groups is variable. Supervision of foster carers has ensured that children's issues are known, and supported by the agency. Foster carers are child-focused but have not always been thoroughly engaged in accounting for and evidencing their practice. In some cases, they have not completed written records on the child's well-being since 2013 and supervision has not successfully addressed this.

The agency has developed its training calendar and has provided more local venues for training to try to increase engagement. However, the agency has not sufficiently monitored training. A carer who had only attended one training course since June 2014 was described as a 'keen and enthusiastic participant' in training in her annual review. Not all carers who have children and young people placed with them have completed the agency's core training which includes subjects such as child protection, first aid and safer care. Some children and young people are placed with carers who have not had training to meet their specific needs, such as in missing, sexual exploitation and self-harm. Supervising social workers support carers to complete their 'training, support and development' workbooks and 65% of carers have done this which is similar to the national average.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Managers in the agency understand the range of risks which may arise for children looked after. They ensure, through close liaison between supervising social workers and carers, that children and young people are kept safe and that any changes to the risks they may present or experience are responded to.

Safeguarding children and young people forms part of the agency's core training,

although several carers have not undertaken this training or have not attended a refresher course for over three years. This means that a minority of carers may not have the knowledge or sufficient understanding of the risks posed to children and young people and what action they must take to safeguard them. However, these gaps are addressed through supervision and, when managers become aware of any safeguarding concerns, they work closely with the carers to ensure children are protected and inform the relevant authorities.

Foster carers know their children well, including the risks they may present. However, not all risk assessments detail all the risks associated with the child or young person and they are not always updated after incidents. Some risk assessments do not detail the actions carers should take to reduce and prevent risks from occurring such as children and young people going missing or displaying challenging behaviour. Some children and young people's risk assessments are reactive rather than preventive and do not consistently provide carers with all the information they would benefit from. Some carers informed us that they were not provided with copies of children and young people's risk assessments, in particular those in relation to child sexual exploitation. However, supervising social workers do have substantial training and awareness of high risk behaviours and offer carers close, helpful support to manage these issues.

The majority of carers' safe care policies are standardised and not child or carer specific. Some were in need of update, for example, referring to previously placed children. Some carers had not had an unannounced visit in a year from their supervising social worker to ensure carers' practice safeguards and to promote children and young people's welfare.

Carers support children and young people to take age-appropriate risks and to develop their independence. For example, carers have provided education to children on 'road safety' and 'stranger danger' to enable them to walk home from school independently.

The strength of relationships between children and young people and their carers has helped to ensure that incidents of children and young people going missing are relatively low in this large agency. Rates are higher amongst unaccompanied asylum seeking children, which is not unique to this agency. Information about missing incidents is monitored but the quality of the information is not consistent. The agency does not always follow its own missing persons policy in relation to risk assessments, strategies to reduce incidents and carers' responses when children and young people go missing. When children and young people go missing carers take appropriate action to try to establish their whereabouts through telephone calls and text messages. Carers inform the police and relevant professionals when a child or young person goes missing, in line with the agency's policy. When children and young people have not had the opportunity to speak to an independent person on their return, the agency has ensured one of their staff have completed this. However, the agency has not always assertively requested that placing authorities fulfil this role. This lack of independence in speaking to children who go missing may inhibit them from disclosing some of their reasons for going missing.

Effective support to carers has successfully maintained some very challenging placements. Children and young people who might otherwise have been subject to

placement breakdown have achieved stability and continuity, including those in sibling groups. The use of physical intervention by carers is exceptionally rare and where used it has been both necessary and proportionate. The only household where this has occurred is well supported. Nevertheless, the carers have not yet received refresher training on physical intervention. Arrangements for this were being finalised during this inspection.

Recruitment processes are thorough and ensure that all carers and other adults living in their households have Disclosure and Barring Service checks completed. The suitability of households are considered carefully. Regular supervision, including unannounced visits in the majority of cases, ensures that any changes in the households are known to the agency.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires Improvement**

There has not been a registered manager in post since May 2015. A manager was appointed promptly in June 2015 but Ofsted is yet to receive a completed registration application for him. He commenced this process in July 2015 and did submit an application, but did not follow up a resubmission request. It has now been determined that the current manager will move into the responsible individual role and the person currently in this role will apply to become the registered manager. The period without proper registration has been lengthy. However, both the current and the prospective managers are suitably qualified and experienced for the role of managing this large fostering agency.

The agency is overseen by a strong and effective management team which provides good oversight to the high volume of care placements across many local authority areas. The agency is forward looking, investing in improvement, for example, in its IT systems. It is ambitious for children resulting in the excellent school attendance and wide range of external activities children and young people access. The oversight of fostering households has ensured carers are well supported, and this in turn leads to carers feeling empowered and taking responsibility for the children and young people that they care for. Detailed consistent processes have not always supported this strong leadership. For example, some gaps in carers' training had not been identified and written documentation available to manage risk has not reflected all the issues the carers and their supervisors plan for. There have been a small number of discrepancies, for example, an instance of children under five years old sleeping in bunk beds, which was not picked up promptly, and a young person's savings being misused by a carer. In this case, the agency ensured no loss to the young person. Some carers do not have appropriate car insurance or home and contents insurance.

The agency monitors its service delivery using a wide variety of methods which are mostly effective. Principal amongst these is the close supervision of foster households, including monthly progress reports to placing authorities, and the way

important information is shared amongst supervising social workers and their managers. It is noted that these systems have supported development well without always ensuring sufficient audit of systems. Current monitoring systems reflect strengths, for example, in regulation 35 reports. Managers also plan to utilise the new database to better cumulatively gather and track the progress and outcomes of children and young people. This is not yet in place. The agency does consult with carers and children and young people, and they are in the process of establishing carer ambassadors and a young people's champion. It is noted that children and young people and carers have influence within the agency; for example, care leavers are involved in training foster carers and carers have contributed to social worker recruitment interviews. However, feedback from children, young people and carers does not always feed into the review of the service.

The agency ensures appropriately low caseloads for supervising social workers. It liaises closely with other agencies including commissioners. This enables them to be responsive to individual need, liaise closely with placing authorities and determine best plans for children and young people. This contributes to children's placement stability.

Although the fostering panel has had weaknesses in this inspection period, these were being addressed prior to this inspection, an example of managers effectively identifying and improving areas of unsatisfactory practice.

The Children's Guide is a bright, child-friendly document, also made available in Punjabi and by video for young children. The current version does not include the email address of the Chief Inspector.

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.