

The Fostering Company

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Fostering Company Ltd is a privately run independent fostering agency. At the time of the inspection, the staffing of the agency comprised the responsible individual, registered manager, a social worker and an administration manager. The agency also employs a part-time trainer and a part-time quality assurance manager, as well as independent social workers, to carry out some of its assessments of prospective foster carers. At the time of the inspection, the agency had nine foster caring families and a total of 11 children in foster placements.

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 are 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 good fostering agency. Its practice is thorough, careful and highly child focused. The agency is efficient and effective in its work. This supports its high standards of social work practice. Consequently, work to promote positive outcomes for young people is outstanding, and their lives and life chances are significantly improved.

The agency's work is underpinned by the knowledge, understanding and insight that its managers and staff have of young people's needs. This informs the agency's work to recruit, assess, approve and provide ongoing supervision and support to foster carers. Assessments of foster carers are very thorough, insightful and evaluative. The agency provides foster carers with very high levels of support and good, relevant training, which helps them to develop. This ensures that, once approved, foster carers are well equipped to meet young people's needs and significantly enhance their progress and life experiences.

The agency works effectively and creatively with local authorities to make and support placements that meet young people's needs. This and the very high levels of placement support provided, mean that young people live in stable and settled placements that help them to grow and progress.

The agency keeps young people safe. The stable placements they live in do not end in unplanned ways, and they do not go missing from their foster homes. Staff from the agency meet young people regularly and know them well. Young people have a clear say in their own care, in how they live their lives and in the way in which the agency works.

The agency benefits from strong leadership and management. Oversight of the agency's practice is generally very good. However, in one case the arrangements to make one placement of children with a foster carer were not good enough in terms of a full review of the carer's ability to provide the placement.

Monitoring is proactive and focused on improving the quality of the agency's work, but the detail of the agency's day-to-day monitoring is not always good enough to ensure that agency records are of suitable quality in every case. Formal, periodic monitoring of the agency's work is comprehensive. However, it does not include the views of fostered children, their carers and social workers specifically enough, so is not as objective as it should be.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meet(s) the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that reviews of foster carers take place whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary. Specifically, ensure that children are not placed with foster carers outside their current terms of approval without this approval being reviewed and changed to reflect the proposed placement. (Regulation 28(2))	18/11/2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record-keeping and take action when needed. (National minimum standard 26.2)
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. Specifically, ensure that the views of foster carers, fostered children and their social workers are explicitly reflected in the agency's reviews of the quality of its care. (National minimum standard 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The strong leadership and management in this agency and the high quality of service provided to young people and their foster carers lead to significantly enhanced quality of life for fostered young people. Thorough assessments, high levels of support and careful matching and placement planning enable young people to benefit from living in stable, well-supported placements and, as a result, to make excellent progress.

The agency works very closely with local authority social workers to find foster carers who are well suited to meet young people's individual needs. Placements are only made in a planned manner. This allows time for young people and their future families to get to know each other and helps to ensure that good information is shared.

Once placements are made, the agency provides young people with excellent support. Agency social work staff visit young people in their foster placements on a regular basis and get to know them well. Workers provide young people and their carers with a great deal of support, including practical help with transport, outings and more formal support. This very sound and child-focused practice leads to very stable placements. Since the agency was registered in 2013, no young people have experienced unplanned endings of their placements. This helps them to develop positive relationships, have an influence over their own care, make excellent progress and transform their lives.

Young people develop really good relationships with their foster carers that nurture them and help them to grow and mature. For example, one young person said that he feels 'part of the family', and another said of his carer, 'Love her. We are family.' The quality of these relationships and the work done by the agency is evident in the fact that no young people have gone missing or been absent without authority from their foster placements. This helps to ensure their safety and enable them to continue to make progress. A foster carer, describing the significant emotional progress and developments in a young person's self-esteem and confidence since he was placed said, 'He stands a bit taller now.' A social worker said that a young person has 'calmed, improved enormously, learned and has better relationships. She has made tremendous strides and is a different child now.'

Young people have a real voice in their own care and in the operation of the agency. The agency's managers and staff meet with young people regularly and know them

well. They use a range of formal and informal methods to seek their views, including group activities, individual meetings, activities and questionnaires. Consultation takes place in a fun way, which young people enjoy and which helps to engage them. Young people have been involved in interviewing for a social worker post, revising the forms used to seek young people's views for the reviews of their foster carers, and work to redevelop the young persons' guide is in hand.

The agency uses its excellent knowledge of the young people to monitor and promote their progress and experiences. The agency works very closely in a highly effective partnership with foster carers and local authority social workers. This helps young people to experience positive outcomes across all areas of their lives.

Young people's physical and emotional health is improved by their access to all the primary health provision and any specialist service that they require. In situations in which specialist services are unavailable or delayed, the agency advocates strongly for young people and arranges alternative provision when necessary.

The support for young people's educational progress is similarly excellent. This means that young people make excellent progress in this area. For example, one young person's school report said that the young person's academic achievement has 'improved dramatically across the board in each term'.

Young people do not experience unnecessary school moves. The agency and its carers make significant efforts to transport young people, sometimes over long distances, to their schools, to avoid disrupting their education. When placements become long term, the agency and its carers work effectively to ensure that young people move in a positive way to appropriate schools in their area. Young people take part in a wide range of activities, such as music, drama, scouting, sport and holidays and activities with their foster families.

The agency's foster carers work exceptionally well with young people's birth families. Where contact arrangements exist, carers positively support these. They work hard to develop good relationships with birth families that will help the young person concerned. The agency and its carers make considerable efforts to support all the practical arrangements regarding young people's contact with their families. They work well with placing social workers to keep these arrangements under review, to ensure that they continue to benefit the young person concerned.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency provides a good-quality service to its foster carers, young people and the local authorities with which it works. Its practice is thorough, careful and focused on the needs of the young people it works with.

The agency has a clear foster carer recruitment strategy in place, which is realistic and well monitored. All enquiries regarding fostering are responded to promptly, and the agency provides enquirers with good information about fostering. Initial screening is robust. This means that both enquirers and the agency are able to decide, at an early point, whether they wish to continue with the assessment process.

Assessments of prospective carers are of excellent quality. They are thorough, robust and highly evaluative. Applicants' suitability is rigorously checked, and their competence and attitudes towards fostering are closely scrutinised. This means that applicants' strengths and vulnerabilities are identified, which enables ongoing support to be focused on their individual needs.

The agency's fostering panel gives close scrutiny to cases presented to it. Panel's deliberations are clear and result in clear, well-reasoned recommendations to the agency decision maker. The minutes of panel meetings are well structured and maintained. Panel provides very good quality assurance feedback to the agency.

Decision-making in the agency is extremely robust, insightful and well evidenced. This provides additional scrutiny of the applicant's suitability to foster as well as monitoring the practice of the agency.

The agency provides its foster carers and the young people they care for with excellent levels of support. Carers have access to support, either by phone or in person, at any time, day or night. The quality of this support is improved further by the excellent relationships that the agency's social work staff have developed with the young people. This enables them to understand their situations and needs and to be able to offer practical advice and guidance.

Formal supervision and support visits to foster carers are very frequent, well recorded and effective. Supervision is child focused and helps to improve the care provided to young people. Foster carers value their supervision highly.

Communication and working relationships between the agency, its carers and placing social workers are very good. This means that the team of people working with a particular young person is able to work effectively to meet their needs. Foster carers

described the agency as being 'extremely ethical and child centred' and having 'strong regard and belief in children. Family atmosphere. Very supportive.'

The agency provides its carers with very good training, based on their own needs as well as essential and 'mandatory' training for all carers. For example, the agency has recently provided its carers with a range of valuable training, including child sexual exploitation, foetal alcohol syndrome, building resilience and identity work. The take-up of essential training, including safeguarding and first aid training, is monitored effectively by the agency to ensure that all carers have their training in these topics updated as necessary.

This training, the thorough recruitment and assessment process, and the high levels of support for carers and children are key factors in supporting the excellent outcomes that the agency achieves for its fostered young people.

The agency reviews foster carers' approval on an annual basis. The reviews provide a thorough consideration of the carers' continued suitability to foster and the appropriateness of the terms of their approval. Reviews are well rounded and objective because the agency is effective in gaining the views of young people and their local authority social workers for the reviews of their foster carers.

However, the agency does not, in every case, carry out a review when it is needed. In one situation, a family group of children was placed with a foster carer outside that carer's terms of approval. In this situation, although the placement was well matched and good support arrangements were built in, a review to consider changing the carer's terms of approval was not held. This means that there was less opportunity for the carer's ability to look after the increased number of young people, and the consequent appropriateness of the placement to be considered objectively.

Communication within the agency and with local authorities and other stakeholders is very good. The agency supports foster carers to be a full part of the team working with the young person, and works effectively with placing local authorities to provide appropriate support to young people or to challenge them when it is not.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people's safety is well assured by the agency. Young people feel safe and cared for by their foster carers. The agency provides young people with good information, and they are able to express their views and voice any concerns that they may have. Staff in the agency know young people well and meet them regularly

to seek their views and listen to any of their worries. When necessary, young people can easily contact independent people should they have any concerns.

The agency's practice in assessing, supporting and training foster carers is thorough and robust. It takes great care when matching young people and their foster carers and planning placements. It is proactive in seeking full information about young people before they are placed and on an ongoing basis as things change. This means that the agency and its carers are able to provide care and support that continually meet young people's needs in stable placements.

Children's safe caring policies and risk assessments are individualised and updated regularly. Foster carers' supervision includes detailed consideration of young people's safety, well-being and progress. Agency social work staff visit carers on a very regular basis for supervision or support meetings as well as on a less formal basis to meet with young people. The care provided to young people is monitored by the agency through these visits, and through the detailed daily recording and monthly summaries that foster carers complete. This enables placing social workers to monitor the well-being and progress of the young people they are responsible for.

No young person has gone missing, or been absent without authority, since the agency was registered. Additionally, there have been no instances of police being called to a foster home. These facts demonstrate the agency's careful safeguarding practice and are key indicators of young people's safety.

Clear guidance is available for foster carers and is in the agency's procedures regarding what action to take should a young person go missing. Additionally, the agency has provided its carers with training in matters such as preventing or responding to child sexual exploitation and countering radicalisation.

The agency has well developed procedures and practice guidance that are understood by staff and foster carers, regarding the identification and managing of any safeguarding or child protection concerns. Foster carers are suitably trained, both before and after approval, in working with young people who may have been abused or who may be at additional risk of harm. Training in child protection and safeguarding is supplemented with topics including safer caring and online safety and social media.

Recruitment processes for foster carers, staff and members of the central panel list are thorough and help to ensure that young people are safeguarded.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency benefits from effective leadership and management. There is a clear focus on quality and the needs of the young people whom the agency works with. It works very well with the local authorities that place young people with its carers. One social worker said that the agency is 'extremely supportive', and that she couldn't fault them'. Another said, 'Joint working is excellent.' The agency uses these positive relationships to ensure that young people receive the correct help and support services.

Supervision and appraisal systems are well developed and thorough. Staff members undertake training, often alongside the agency's foster carers, which helps to maintain and develop their skills. Communication and information sharing in the agency are good. This means that foster carers and young people benefit from a consistent approach by agency staff. The agency's managers and staff meet regularly with foster carers and have close working relationships with them. This helps to ensure that young people receive consistently high levels of support.

The management of the agency is effective both operationally and strategically. The agency has a comprehensive development plan in place, which is underpinned by sound financial monitoring.

The day-to-day monitoring of the quality of the agency's work is generally effective. Quality assurance and monitoring practice focus on the quality of the service and outcomes for the young people. Files are audited on a regular basis to ensure the quality of work and record-keeping. However, this monitoring does not always take place in sufficient detail.

A number of the agency's records include recording errors or absences that the monitoring process had not identified. For example, one record contained a series of inaccuracies in the name of a young person, some foster carers' lists of placements were not fully completed, some records contained inaccurate dates and other key documents contained spelling and grammatical errors.

The manager's periodic monitoring of the agency's operation is comprehensive, with detailed reports being produced on an annual basis, which is appropriate for an agency of this size. In its day-to-day work, the agency seeks the views of foster carers, fostered children and their social workers, information which informs the manager's monitoring processes. However, the manager's monitoring reports do not include specific reference to this feedback, so it is not clear whether these views have been taken into account. Thus, reports of this monitoring do not reflect a fully

objective process of seeking and reflecting feedback from stakeholders about the operation of the agency.

Appropriate arrangements are in place to record and report any significant events and to make the necessary notifications to Ofsted should the need arise.

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.