

Foster Care Associates North West

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC040408
Inspection date 27 June 2016 to 1 July 2016
Inspectors Mrs Lynn O'Driscoll, Jackie Line, Mandy Williams, Sarah Oldham
Type of inspection Full

Setting address Lincoln House, Foxhole Road, Ackhurst Park, Chorley, Lancashire, PR7 1NY
Telephone number 01257 275537
Email Sue.Strettle@coreassets.com
Registered manager Miss Susan Strettle
Responsible individual Mr David Oldham
Date of last inspection 10 July 2014

© Crown copyright 2016

Website: www.gov.uk/ofsted

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is part of a large national company that recruits, assesses, approves, trains and supports foster carers.

This particular registered provision offers a wide range of placements throughout the North West of England. At the time of this inspection, there were 355 children and young people living in foster families.

All the main functions operate from the head office in Chorley. There are three other main offices in Liverpool, Middleton and Lancaster.

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**

This agency clearly demonstrates their commitment to developing children's and young people's individual potential. A high proportion of children and young people benefit from long-term, stable placements and 62 live with at least one of their siblings. They are an integral part of the fostering family and have formed strong, trusting attachments. Consequently, they are happy, safe and secure and their experiences, outcomes and progress are good from their individual starting points.

Children's and young people's wishes and feelings are central to their day-to-day care and they make informed decisions about their futures. However, there are limited opportunities to influence strategic planning and service development. This is acknowledged by the service and a manager has been specifically tasked to progress this work. To this end, they are working through the findings of a recent young inspector's visit to this agency that concluded, 'Participation needs to be much clearer and more inviting, all policies need to be reviewed to make sure that participation is embedded into everything and adhered to stringently and demonstrate that young people are listened to and changes made.'

This agency has a clear recruitment strategy to ensure that it always has a diverse range of carers to meet the unique and complex needs and personal preferences of the children and young people needing foster placements.

The majority of carers feel well supported and are regularly supervised to meet the assessed needs of the children and young people that they care for. Delegated responsibilities are clear. However, a significant number have not completed mandatory courses in a timely manner. Carers are still not always equipped with all the information about the children and young people to ensure that they are providing appropriate care at all times, but they do confirm an improvement in recent months.

Most carers also feel valued as a fundamental part of the professional team working with each child. Effective partnership working with relevant agencies is firmly established to safeguard and protect the children and young people living in foster placements. However, timely independent return interviews with young people who go missing are not consistently taking place to try to prevent a reoccurrence and thereby ensure their safety and well-being.

There has been a significant turnover of staff since the last inspection. This has resulted in a strengthening of the management structure to ensure that there is an individual in day-to-day control of the four main offices. The registered manager has a more strategic position and has been in post for 12 months. Together they are developing new systems and challenging practice to address the shortfalls identified at the last inspection. Realistically, these positive changes will take more time to embed.

The monitoring systems in place are not sufficiently robust to effectively support all their legal responsibilities and to ensure that all records are well maintained.

Consequently, although overall this agency ensures safe and sound care practices, there are a number of regulatory shortfalls in respect to the quality of documentation, arising from this inspection. However, assessments have demonstrably improved in quality, analysis and timeliness.

This is a particularly large service and the shortfalls have affected the judgement across all four offices. However, overall they have not, to date, impacted negatively on the vast majority of children and young people.

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 within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
17: Support, training and information for foster parents 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. This includes timely first aid, record keeping, de-escalation, restraint, and moving and handling training. In addition, records of the outcome of statutory reviews must be made available to the foster carer. (Regulation 17 (1))	30 November 2016
11: Independent fostering agencies—duty to secure welfare Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times, and before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's wishes and feelings (having regard to the child's age and understanding), and religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(i)(ii))	30 September 2016
13. Behaviour management and children missing from foster parent's home Prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents. Specifically, ensure there are effective behaviour management plans in place when necessary. In addition prepare and implement a written procedure to be followed if a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 13 (1)(3))	30 September 2016
28: Reviews and terminations of approval Ensure the foster parent review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service	30 September 2016

provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. When undertaking a review, the fostering service provider must seek and take into account the views of any child placed with the foster parent (subject to the child's age and understanding), and any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent. (Regulation 28 (2)(3)(b)(ii)(iii))	
35: Review of quality of care Maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. Specifically, any measures of control or discipline in respect to children in a foster home. (Regulation 35 (1)(a) Schedule 6(8))	30 September 2016
35: Review of quality of care Ensure the system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency, which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (3))	30 September 2016

Recommendations

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

- Demonstrate that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7)
- If provision of the care plan, including the personal education plan, is delayed, the fostering service continues to follow this up with the responsible authority. (NMS 31.2)
- Ensure that at least one unannounced visit a year is undertaken to every fostering household and a timely, accurate and detailed record is maintained of these visits. (NMS 21.8)
- Ensure that there is an effective system in place for monitoring the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take timely action when needed. This includes: documentation presented to panel; clarity in respect to the two stage assessment process, recourse to the independent review mechanism; approvals by the agency decision maker; and carer recordings. (NMS 26.2)
- Demonstrate that the manager effectively monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends and that immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. This includes, but is not restricted to, restraint and missing from home records. (NMS 25.2)

- Ensure that the IT and communication systems in place are efficient, robust and effective. (NMS 27.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Carers provide children and young people with a child-friendly welcome brochure about their particular foster family prior to admission. This helps children and young people to prepare for their move and gain an understanding of their future placement, so that they settle quickly. One child said, 'I was given a booklet with pictures of my foster family before I moved in, which was very helpful.'

Children and young people are happy in their current placement and the majority have developed secure attachments with their carers. Ten young adults have made a positive decision to remain in placement beyond their 18th birthday until they feel ready to move onto independence. One young adult said that he had initially seen his foster home as a place to stay until he was found a semi-independent resource. He now wants to stay because he feels safe and settled and is being helped to consider options for further education. These examples all demonstrate a strong sense of belonging. Children's and young people's comments include, 'They look after me really well, so I am very happy. They treat me the same as their own children', 'I'm part of the family. They have lots of relations who are now like my relatives' and 'I have lovely meals and we are going to Spain soon. I have made some friends who live nearby who I play with.'

Children's and young people's wishes and feelings influence their day-to-day lives and their futures. This resulted, for example, in one young person moving placement, which was her desired outcome and she is now happy and settled. She was listened to and felt valued which has given her the confidence to assert herself in the future.

Children and young people exercise a genuine choice about contact arrangements with their birth families in line with any legal directions, which is actively promoted and facilitated by their foster carers. This helps them to understand their background and retain their unique identity. Two sisters appropriately placed with separate foster families within this agency are now both thriving. They still enjoy regular face-to-face contact and through social media to maintain their relationship. Another young person said, 'I really like having my sister over for sleepovers.'

All the children and young people accessing this service are receiving appropriate education that best meets their assessed needs and their attendance is very good. Consequently, they are all making good progress from their individual starting points. Many, who were previously disillusioned, now have positive future ambitions. For example, one young person in the same placement for five years has just completed his GCSEs and has secured a place at college in September. Another younger person, already at college studying sport development, is predicted to achieve an A* and has recently got an award for most improved pupil in the entire college. One young person was placed three years ago with poor school attendance and behaviours. He now has 96% attendance and is described as 'a joy to teach'.

Comments from young people include, 'I am really happy here and get on well with the other young person. I am now going to school every day. I am on a work experience at a nursery this week and really enjoying it. I am thinking about doing a

childcare course when I finish school', 'I used to steal from shops, smoke and drink. That's all stopped. My school attendance was poor, but now I go every day and I am predicted to get nine A to C grades in my GCSEs. I want to train to be a nurse' and 'I won an award for being hand writer of the week.'

An extract from a recent school report demonstrates an improved attitude to study, achievements and sensitivity to others. It reads, 'Her hard work and dedication means she has made excellent progress and her English and science achievements are commendable. She has proved herself to be thoughtful, kind and supportive to others.'

Children's and young people's health and well-being are actively promoted. Carers ensure that children and young people have homemade nutritious meals, plenty of fresh air and regular exercise, registration with all relevant health professionals, routine checks and annual health assessments. This agency also effectively advocates for more specialist services to be provided in a timely manner to meet more complex needs. Consequently, positive outcomes include a young person who is now a healthy weight, which has also resulted in improved self-esteem, good sleep patterns which have demonstrably reduced challenging behaviours and improved speech and language. One baby, who had not progressed to solid foods and was developmentally delayed, now enjoys a wide range of foods, the stimulation of nursery and has met expected milestones.

Children and young people really enjoy taking part in a wide range of constructive and meaningful activities. They are fully involved in all of the fostering family events and holidays and in a wide variety of clubs within the local community. One young person plays football for a local team. This gives them a strong sense of belonging. One young person said, 'I really like to spend time at home with my foster family watching DVDs or going out together for the day. We have just been to the zoo. I like the trampoline park and it is really funny when they try it. My carers have taught me to swim.'

Individual interests and talents are actively encouraged and supported, which serves to further increase children's and young people's competencies and confidence. Examples include horse riding, ice skating, archery, art, wrestling, gymnastics, chess, cycling, computers and drama. One young person is the British taekwondo champion for her age group. Another young person has gained the confidence to take part in a public drama performance. Within two weeks of moving into his current foster family three years ago, one young person joined a local fencing team. Within two months he was competing regionally, entered a national competition within 12 months and now travels throughout Europe representing England. These are outstanding achievements.

All these opportunities demonstrably increase children's and young people's self-esteem. They also say that they really appreciate the fact that significant events and achievements are now recognised by the agency as well as by their individual carers.

Fostering families particularly enjoy the annual summer event organised by the agency at an outdoor activity centre, with the opportunity to try a variety of stimulating and challenging activities such as canoeing and rock climbing. They also look forward to the annual national football competition and choir event and the grand picnic and art in the park. One carer took the time to write to the agency

expressing their appreciation of these events saying, 'The Christmas party was great and much better than previous years. It was really well organised with a good venue, food and company.'

Children and young people benefit from age- and ability-appropriate opportunities to develop the practical and emotional skills needed to prepare them for future successful independent living. Children's and young people's comments include, 'I make my own bed, help with the dishes and in the garden and feed the rabbits', 'I like cooking and bringing in the firewood, but I don't help with the pots if I can help it', 'I get to have my own money, make snacks and meals and I can iron' and 'I passed my driving test on my 18th birthday.'

This agency offer employment opportunities for care leavers with excellent career prospects. For example, one young adult has progressed to become the national participation lead and is actively working with this region to develop in this area.

Some young people have moved into independence secure in the knowledge of continued support from their carers. One young adult said, 'I am now at university, but I know I can still ring my carers for support when I need it.' Another young person went to his ex-carers on Christmas Eve, so that they could help him put a bike together for his son. A young mum was really appreciative of the practical help from her carer in helping her to secure her own tenancy and setting up her first home. She said, 'My baby's room is beautiful.'

To their credit, young people are also sensitive and responsive to the needs of others less fortunate than themselves. One recent example is organising a sponsored charity run. Another young person received an 'outstanding individual award' from his placing authority for his commitment to improving the experiences of children in hospital. One child said, 'I got a gold letter from school for helping a boy who had an accident. His mum said she was so proud of me.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

This service ensures a sufficient number and diversity of carers to meet the unique needs of the children and young people requiring foster placements. This includes caring for a significantly higher proportion of children with disabilities than other comparative agencies. They have also purposely increased the number of solo placements for young people displaying highly complex needs.

The majority of current supervising social workers know their foster carers really well, including their individual strengths and skills and the needs of the children already in placement. This means that some very good matches are made, based on sound judgements. Overall, this is highly effective, demonstrated by the longevity of placements.

However, this good practice is not always reflected in the matching documentation and has resulted in disruptions. Examples include ethnicity needs not being addressed in a transracial placement, known offending and going missing from home history not being detailed and robustly risk assessed and a young person with highly

complex needs being placed with new and inexperienced carers. This is recognised in the agency's service improvement plan and it is acknowledged that efforts have recently been made to improve systems around matching. This is in full consultation with carers with vacancies, but realistically these new processes are not yet good enough. In addition, the current post holder has only been in post for seven weeks, so the full impact of her role has not been fully realised.

Most carers feel highly valued as an integral part of the professional team working with the child or young person and are actively involved in care planning. The vast majority of carers express high satisfaction with the support that they receive from their current supervising social workers, the out-of-hours service and the therapeutic and educational support provided. These interventions have successfully maintained some highly challenging placements. The agency is working creatively to address vacancies within the educational support posts, including for example, the provision of associate education workers.

There has been a significant turnover of managers, staff, panel members and carers over the last 12 months. Managers say that this is directly due to the higher expectations introduced and more stringent performance management. This initially resulted in uncertainty, instability and poor communication. Now, those who have stayed are happy, motivated and passionate to progress the new developments. They say that they feel more appreciated and valued.

Many carers are pleased with the recent relocation of the head office, resulting in improved accessibility to managers and support groups. One carer's comments reflect many views, 'There have been a lot of positive changes over recent months, including the commencement of a support group for foster carers caring for children with disabilities.'

The management team has also listened to carers about reinstating a mentoring service and have advocated at a national level about improving their respite policy to ensure that it is more child-friendly. Currently, their own identified support carers, who know the children well, are only able to provide respite care for 24 hours. This issue has been highlighted by the manager with the company and a positive action plan to address the same, is currently in place.

A few carers say that the quality of support is dependent on the individual worker. Also, not all carers are receiving at least one unannounced visit within a 12-month period, which is a minimum standard and safeguard. The agency's own policy is twice yearly. Moreover, the quality of these documents is variable, suggesting that the monitoring and auditing processes are not sufficiently robust.

Carers are positive about the current training schedule in place in respect to the improved choice of venues and range of courses on offer. The agency has also ensured that no training courses have been cancelled this year after complaints from carers in 2015 reflected in the Ofsted survey returns. Carers' comments include, 'The attachment training is really, really, good, in depth and intensive', 'Training sessions are a really useful chance to meet and learn from each other, as well as the trainers' and 'I like the fact that we get a chance to deliver some training as we can directly relate to carers, share good practice and experience with others. Also, it develops us as carers.'

However, a key shortfall arising from this inspection is that training records suggest

that there are still carers who have not completed all their mandatory courses in a timely manner. For example, 90 main carers and 129 secondary carers are not trained in first aid to help ensure an efficient and safe response to minor accidents and injuries. The scrutiny and monitoring of carer's individual training needs, therefore, is not sufficiently robust.

The vast majority of applicants were satisfied with the thoroughness of the assessment process and their panel experiences. The overall quality and depth of analysis in assessments have demonstrably improved. However, the documentation currently used does not make the two stage application process clear. This links with 43% of carer survey returns stating a lack of understanding about the functions of the independent review mechanism, however this is balanced by the fact that there have not been any independent reviews since the last inspection.

The panel is well chaired to ensure that all members fully contribute, and the quality of the minutes has recently improved. However, in June, one item was appropriately deferred due to lack of documentation to make an informed recommendation. This suggests that the quality assurance processes prior to panel are still not sufficiently thorough. Also, some records of decision do not clearly stipulate the information considered by the agency decision maker and the consequent reasons for the approval.

Furthermore, the auditing systems in place have not effectively ensured that all carer annual reviews are undertaken in a timely manner and/or are informed by feedback from all children and young people in placement during the review period and their social workers.

The agency is continuing to recruit to the central list mindful of the necessity to ensure quoracy, a wide diversity of expertise and a better gender balance.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The vast majority of children and young people who contributed to this inspection confirmed that they feel very safe, happy and settled in their current placement and in their local community. One young person said, 'Before I came here two years ago, I had six previous placements. Now I am happy and safe and I no longer feel angry all the time.'

At the time of this inspection, one young person felt 'lonely and isolated' due to the rural location of the placement. Her views have been listened to and an alternative placement is actively being sought. This shows that children's and young people's feelings are genuinely valued and positively responded to in their best interests.

Since 2012, year-on-year stability rates in this agency have been better than national comparators. At the time of this inspection, two thirds of children and young people had been in placement for over 12 months. Of those, 76 have lived in the same foster family for over six years and 32 for over 10 years.

Many children and young people are enjoying the safety and security of long-term, stable placements with their siblings. Moreover, they all confirm that they have at

least one adult who they feel comfortable talking openly to if they did have any worries. One young person said, 'My carer can always tell how I am feeling and helps me to talk about things.'

Social workers express satisfaction with the quality of care provided. For example, 'This carer has helped turn my young person's life around for the better and they are very relaxed in each other's company. She provides exemplary care.'

Children and young people know how to complain and a few have exercised that right. Records demonstrate that they were taken seriously, fully investigated and outcomes reached in a timely manner. This reinforces the fact that their opinions matter and are valued, which in turn increases their self-esteem and confidence.

Incidents of going missing from home are still slightly higher than national comparators, but there has been a reduction since the last inspection. Effective protocols are in place with the local police and other relevant safeguarding agencies to protect the few who do go missing. This has resulted, for example, in the serving of harbouring notices. However, there is no effective system in place to ensure independent return interviews are completed in a timely manner. This means that meaningful discussions are not always taking place with young people to inform risk assessments and to try to prevent a reoccurrence. Consequently, the data provided to Ofsted stated that in 35% of cases, the agency did not know the reason for the young person going missing. The national comparator is 22%. Also, this agency has only just begun to differentiate between going missing and absences. The current systems used do not capture patterns and trends and therefore the service could not readily provide an overall evaluation of high-risk children and young people.

The vast majority of children and young people respond well to the consistent boundaries and routines in place. This has resulted in a significant decrease in challenging behaviours. Consequently, the use of restraint is rare and is lower than national comparators. However, a significant number of fostering households have not completed de-escalation training or renewed this mandatory training within the required timescales.

Moreover, no carers are specifically trained in restraint to ensure safe practice at all times. This contravenes the agency's own policy and has resulted in inappropriate practices and variable quality recordings. Recent examples include locking internal doors to try to manage behaviours, which had gone unchecked for two months and carrying a young person outside until he calmed. Independent reviewing officers say that up to very recently, there has been a lack of effective challenge of some carers. If carers do not know how to intervene safely, this places them and the child at risk of possible injury.

While it is acknowledged that the number of incidents are low, the shortfalls highlight that the systems in place are not yet good enough to protect and promote children's and young people's safety at all times.

Some risk assessments relating to challenging behaviour contain insufficient information about how behaviours will be managed safely. Some are not regularly updated so that new concerns and significant progress are not accurately reflected. This further demonstrates that the monitoring of records is not sufficiently robust.

Monitoring and controlling of the service is the main shortfall. It is exacerbated by the fact that key safeguarding information is contained in different documents and

stored in different places on the system. This results in some safeguarding processes being missed, including timely police checks. It also makes it difficult for managers to gain a clear overview of risks and risk management strategies and is not an efficient and effective way of recording.

This agency benefits from highly-experienced carers with the competence and confidence to enable children and young people to take age-appropriate risks as part of the natural development into adulthood.

Young people have benefited from targeted individual sessions and group work to raise their awareness of risks and to explore appropriate strategies to keep themselves safe when enjoying independence in the community and online. Five young people all specifically highlighted that their carers advocated on their behalf and effectively stopped them being bullied at school. Comments from young people include, 'I learned about healthy relationships from my carer and now I make good choices' and 'We talk about safety a lot.'

Foster carers say that they fully understand their role in securing children's and young people's safety and protection and the vast majority, but not all, have completed the required safeguarding training in a timely manner. They found the child sexual exploitation awareness training extremely helpful.

There was a marked difference of opinion in respect to the support afforded to the few carers who have experienced being subject to an allegation. One carer felt that their supervising social worker was 'out of her depth' and therefore unable to be supportive during this anxious time. In contrast, another carer said, 'I received a lot of support from the child's social worker and was offered independent support. There was little contact from my supervising social worker, but I was aware that they have to keep some distance and it only took about two weeks to resolve.'

The current auditing tool does not distinguish between complaints and allegations. This is unhelpful and inefficient when extracting and evaluating this information as is legally required.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Although referrals have recently reduced, this service remains financially viable. In fact, during this inspection, the board agreed funding for a brand new and more intuitive IT system, having listened to their workforce. All the managers are competent in using this particular system. They are, therefore, highly optimistic that it will significantly improve monitoring and controlling of the service, which they have identified as an area requiring improvement.

Following a lot of resistance to change and significant staff turnover as a direct result, the new management team is confident that it now benefits from qualified, experienced and very enthusiastic staff who share its improvement agenda. Comments from staff include, 'It is much better than before. It is tighter and more streamlined', 'The new managers have listened and are addressing our concerns. There is more structure and support', 'It feels safer as an organisation. There is more

direction, accountability and requirements of us, and timescales for making sure things are outcomed' and 'The expectations on us are clear. We have a greater awareness of what's going on.'

They confirm manageable workloads to enable them to provide good support to their carers, high satisfaction with the range and quality of the training provided to continue to develop their individual skills and competencies, regular, good-quality supervision and ongoing support and accessible and approachable senior managers.

The responsible individual said, 'This is now a different region in respect to the direction of travel since the last inspection. We have now got the right people in the right places to keep progressing forward.'

Commissioners are highly satisfied with the service afforded to them. Comments include, 'This agency responds quickly to our requests' and 'This is a proactive agency that responds well to need.'

The management team has only recently strengthened and it is making significant changes to the systems, but realistically these are not, as yet, firmly embedded. The registered manager has been in post since June 2015 and successfully registered with Ofsted in September 2015. Three out of her four service managers are new. They share an open and transparent approach and are realistic and passionate about driving the necessary improvements.

The statement of purpose accurately describes the aims and services provided by this agency and has recently been updated to reflect all the staff changes. The service currently provides a children's guide for younger children and one for older young people and a braille version. However, these formats do not meet the diversity of linguistic and/or ability needs of a number of children and young people currently in placements. This means that they may not be fully aware of the services available to them and their rights and responsibilities on admission. In an isolated instance, ethnicity information was unclear on the annual data provided to Ofsted, but was addressed during the course of the inspection.

There has been a positive response to the four requirements and six recommendations made at the last full inspection on 10 July 2014. However, they have not all been fully addressed. Children and young people now have the opportunity to contribute to the annual appraisals. Staff recruitment files have improved to better demonstrate robust recruitment and selection processes to ensure a safe and competent workforce. Delegated authority is clear and panel timescales are more closely monitored.

By the end of the inspection, all carers had completed the training, support and development standards and a more robust system is now in place to ensure completion within 12 months of approval. However, the agency is accepting one portfolio for carer couples despite mandatory courses not being completed. Moreover, this is not robustly scrutinised at panel.

New formats have been developed to record missing from home and restraint incidents and the restraint policy reviewed and revised. However, restraint records are not always completed by the individual who physically intervened nor are they consistently reviewed promptly by managers to ensure safe and effective practice. There is limited evidence of any reflection with young people and carers to improve future practice. Moreover, the current monitoring system does not capture and

therefore evaluate sanctions used by carers to ensure that they are proportionate to the particular misdemeanour.

At the last inspection and reflected in the 2015 and 2016 Ofsted surveys, a number of carers were not always provided with all the information about a child required to ensure that they are providing appropriate and individualised care. It is acknowledged that the service have prioritised obtaining care plans. Consequently, by the end of the inspection there were 12 missing out of a possible 355 care plans, which is a marked improvement. Receipt of personal education plans remains a challenge for the agency, as 163 are in place out of a possible 281. This means that, despite the agency's escalation to placing authorities, some carers do not have the specific information needed to support individualised targets.

The main repeated shortfall arising from this inspection is that the monitoring and auditing systems in place do not demonstrate robust attention to detail, which has resulted in regulatory shortfalls. There is also a lack of consistency in uploading key documents onto the IT system. This negatively affects the ability to robustly monitor and to clearly evidence when and by whom key decisions are made. It also means that accurate key data is not easily extracted. Consequently, inconsistent data was provided to the inspectors regarding new approvals and carers who have left the agency and inaccurate information in respect to missing from home incidents.

Undertaking annual health and safety risk assessments is a basic safeguarding process to evidence a safe fostering environment. However, seven had not been completed in a timely manner and one lacked sufficient detail. For example, it was not until a carer review 11 months on, that it was identified that the carers did not have business use on their car insurance and that hazardous items were not securely stored.

Furthermore, the quality of recordings varies considerably in respect to health and safety risk assessments, unannounced visits and matching consideration forms. Some carers are not recording children's and young people's experiences and progress, which is an expectation in the foster carer agreement. In one instance, where carer practice is being addressed by the agency, recording shortfalls mean that a sibling group will not be able to look back on twelve months of their childhood. In response, the agency has now included recording training as a mandatory course for all carers and staff.

The last internal annual review report on the quality of service provision was completed when the registered manager was very new in post and had not gained an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of this very large region. Consequently, it lacks evaluation and does not include the independent views of stakeholders. Moving forward, this agency intends to produce these reports every three months to better monitor progress. A number of actions to develop the service have not been met in the last 12 months. This includes improving consultations and actively involving children and young people in the development of the service. One manager has been tasked to address this with the national participation lead.

Notifiable events are forwarded to Ofsted in a timely manner. The details of these have continued to improve since the last inspection. Consequently, they clearly demonstrate that appropriate action has been taken to safeguard and protect the welfare of children and young people in full collaboration with other relevant

agencies. There is also documentary evidence that the agency challenges local authorities if timely strategy meetings are not arranged in line with protocols.

This service is very good at providing relevant updates to Ofsted until a final outcome is reached. All notifications are scrutinised by the registered manager. Having noticed a trend of carers serving notice on placements, she immediately and effectively tightened the system. She now ensures that sustainability meetings always take place to explore additional support to prevent a disruption. The excellent stability rates demonstrate the effectiveness of this system and carers feel that their concerns are listened to and valued.

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.