

Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services

Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Limited
Xcel 2000, 8 London Road, SITTINGBOURNE, Kent ME10 1NA
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The head office of Xcel 2000 Fostercare Services Limited is in Sittingbourne, Kent. Home-based workers additionally support carers in London, Essex and Hertfordshire. At the time of this inspection there were 44 approved fostering households, with 62 children in placement. The agency provides foster placements for assessment, support, respite and rehabilitation, as well as emergency, short, medium and long-term care for children. The agency also provides parent and child placements.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 May 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 5 October 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children and young people feel safe and learn how to confidently express their views and feelings.
- Staff and foster carers have a good understanding of the needs of the children and young people. As a result, they are able to manage risks effectively, taking into consideration the children and young people's age and ability.
- Children and young people build strong relationships and develop secure attachments resulting in a sense of belonging. Many of the children and young people achieve permanency.
- Children and young people make good progress in health and education through the proactive and effective support of the agency and foster carers.
- Children and young people learn to take responsibility in line with growing up. Those preparing to move on are well equipped with the skills they have learned.
- A wide range of experiences and opportunities are enjoyed by the children and young people. New and existing interests are nurtured and encouraged.
- Staff and foster carers benefit from comprehensive training opportunities which equip them to meet children and young people's needs well.
- Strong managerial oversight values the input and feedback from all stakeholders. This inclusive agency is responsive, and learns lessons to continually improve its practice.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Staff supervision records do not consistently capture the content and decisions made at supervision meetings.
- The written records in respect of some recruitment checks lack sufficient detail.
- Matching processes are not rigorous in cases where the status of a placement changes, such as from short term to long term.
- Information about the children and young people is not always written in a manner which can be clearly understood, or will be helpful to a child or young person when they access their files now or in the future.
- Individual risk management strategies are not always clearly recorded in writing when these are agreed or altered. This compromises the agency's ability to track and monitor the effectiveness of these interventions.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Children are able to develop and practice skills to build and maintain positive relationships, be assertive and to resolve conflicts positively. (This is with specific reference to ensuring that all strategies that foster carers are to use to help children and young people avoid risks, and the actions they are to take when these approaches have not been successful, are clearly set out in writing.) (NMS 3.3)
- The fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. (This is with specific reference to ensuring that if the status of the child's placement changes from a bridging placement to a longer term placement that the foster carer's matching matrix is reviewed in light of these changes.) (NMS 15.1)
- The fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including volunteers) for the fostering service which includes: b.) DBS Disclosures, including the level of the Disclosure, and the unique reference number (in line with eligibility to obtain such checks). (This is with specific reference to recording the levels of DBS checks.) (NMS 19.3 b)
- A written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (This is with specific reference to recording duration, supervision agreements and identifying actions which are

then followed up in subsequent meetings.) (NMS 24.5)

- Information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. (NMS 26.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Strong initial matching processes help the children and young people to readily settle into their fostering households. The agency ensures that full information is obtained to enable a detailed understanding of individuals' needs. Helpful information is shared with the foster carers, and careful matching considerations lead to positive experiences for children and young people when joining their new homes. However, such good practice is not always continued when the status of a placement changes. In one example, when a bridging placement changed to long term, the initial matching considerations were not reviewed or updated. This missed opportunity to review the foster carers' changing support and training needs was a factor in the breakdown of this particular placement.

Children and young people develop trusting relationships with their foster carers. The agency's staff and foster carers know the children and young people well and this has been acknowledged by external professionals, such as placing social workers. Children and young people feel a sense of belonging to their foster family and form strong attachments.

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of experiences provided by their foster carers and the agency. These are tailored to individual interests and abilities and include horse riding, boxing, karate, brownies, sea cadets, swimming and roller-skating. Involvement with local faith groups is promoted where children and young people have expressed an interest, or where this is integral to the development of their individual identity.

The agency's creative and comprehensive participation programme, involving activity days, provides the children and young people with some memorable firsts, most recently ice skating and outdoor pursuit activities. Such activities are additionally used as a vehicle to engage the children and young people in discussions about their views and wishes, and about the services provided by the agency. This ensures that the agency keeps the child's voice at the centre of developments within the service. Staff produce magazines and information in a child-friendly format covering topics of interest to the children and young people in foster care. Staff and foster carers actively ensure that children and young people are supported sensitively to understand why certain things happen, or why decisions are taken which are not in accordance with their view.

Children and young people know how to make a complaint. They have the opportunity to confidentially communicate any concerns they may have to the agency. Independent support is available to children and young people who may have difficulty in expressing their wishes or feelings. Since the last inspection, one complaint made by a child was acted on carefully. The child's concerns were fully investigated and the outcome, and any actions to be taken, were discussed with, and understood by, the child.

The agency has developed a respite care arrangement, which children and young people view as a positive holiday or fun sleepover. Children and young people have provided positive feedback about their experience with designated respite families who know the children and young people and provide security and consistency of care. This also provides a positive opportunity for children and young people to spend time with other children and young people in a similar situation to their own.

Most children and young people are in full-time education. Where they are not, the agency actively advocates to ensure that education is provided which meets the children and young people's needs, in a timely manner. Staff and foster carers ensure that individuals are provided with thoughtful and creative substitute educational programmes until permanent school placements are identified.

Many children and young people make excellent progress in school. Foster carers ensure that they work closely with teaching staff to maximise children's learning. The agency ensures that, where appropriate, children are provided with additional tuition to enhance their learning. One child, who had disrupted education for a considerable period of time prior to his placement with the agency, is now predicted to attain seven good GCSE grades and is the deputy head boy in his school.

Meticulous monitoring ensures that the support provided by the agency enhances children and young people's experience and progress. The agency's education champion works closely with education staff and foster carers to ensure that plans and achievements are regularly monitored. Where children and young people may be underachieving, professionals and foster carers work closely together to support children and young people's learning opportunities. One foster carer has worked with education staff to ensure that they fully understand a child's individualised communication style. This has resulted in improved participation in activities provided by the school, and has improved the child's relationships with teaching staff and other students. The child's social worker said, 'She now really enjoys being in school, and has made friends. She is now keen to learn new things and try new experiences.'

Foster carers encourage children and young people to learn self-care skills in accordance with their age and ability. Their progress is measured from their individual starting points, and small but significant steps are positively acknowledged. One child has learned how to button her blouse and tie her shoelaces. This is a highly significant achievement and was celebrated by the agency in the form of a certificate and gift voucher.

Young people in continuing care arrangements are supported effectively by the agency's leaving care champion. Young people develop life and independence skills which are appropriate to their age and ability. Progress is carefully monitored and individualised support is provided to every young person preparing to leave care. Foster carers receive effective training which improves their knowledge and provides them with the necessary skills to help young people through this significant transition at their own emotional and cognitive pace. This ensures that young people are adequately prepared for living independently, resulting in an improved foundation on which to build their adult lives.

One young person spoke in extremely positive terms of her experience. She described in detail the quality of the relationship with her foster carers and the continuing support she receives. Consequently, she has confidence in the skills and strategies she has been helped to develop for independent living.

Children and young people enjoy excellent support from their foster carers to improve all aspects of their health. Foster carers proactively seek professional advice and advocate on behalf of the children and young people to good effect. The agency has successfully advocated on behalf of children when there have been delays in meeting an identified specialist need. One foster carer determinedly pursued the provision of child mental health services to access support for a child with a complex health issue, which impacted on the child's ability to develop relationships with his peers. This resulted in the child being able to form friendships and confidently participate in group activities with other children. Where necessary, the agency has accessed the services of a clinical psychotherapist to advise and support foster carers in dealing with children and young people's difficult feelings and emotions.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children and young people are safe and feel safe. Foster carers demonstrate that they have understood, and know how to apply, the training they have received in safeguarding and child protection. They talk knowledgeably about the links between child sexual exploitation, episodes where children are missing, and potential radicalisation. Foster carers are alert to the dangers and benefits of social media use, and use this knowledge to protect and educate the children and young people in their care about both aspects. They know how to respond appropriately to any disclosures and allegations made by the children and young people. Foster carers are trained to identify and respond appropriately to children and young people who may self-harm. They implement this training in practice and, as a result, the children and young people learn different and safer coping strategies.

Children and young people develop trusting relationships with their foster carers. They are confident that their foster carers will take action in the light of concerns they raise with them. One child provided feedback to the agency indicating how protected he felt after his foster carers contacted his school following an incident of bullying.

The assessment process has a strong focus on prospective foster carers' ability to promote the welfare of children and young people, and to protect them from harm. Good quality training improves their knowledge of what they need to do to achieve this, and to teach children and young people how to keep themselves safe.

Foster carers speak positively about the behaviour management training. As a result, they understand behaviour as an expression of feelings or life experiences, and manage the behaviour in this context. Their focus is on encouraging children and

young people to behave well, through praise and rewards. The use of negative consequences is minimal, and is recorded by foster carers. As a result, children and young people flourish in a range of settings as their social skills improve.

On the rare occasions when carers are struggling to manage behaviour they describe the agency support as 'fantastic'. There is always someone who knows them, and the children and young people, available to talk to and visit if required.

The agency ensures that the required levels of recruitment checks are undertaken on all employees, but it does not record this information in full. This omission compromises the agency's ability to fully demonstrate its safe recruitment practice. The agency contracts a number of independent workers who contribute an objective perspective and provide children and carers with an opportunity to talk to someone outside of agency staff. The registered manager also creates this option through unannounced visits to carers.

Responses to allegations against foster carers are prompt, proportionate, child focused and objective. Foster carers are offered access to independent support during an allegation. Such allegations are infrequent, and no action has been taken by the local authority as a result of any allegation since the last inspection. The agency has good links with placing authorities and has used the host authority designated person when necessary.

The registered manager has been actively involved in the development of a multi-agency approach to children and young people who go missing. Episodes of children and young people missing are managed effectively. There are minimal instances of missing, and in one case a child with such a history has not been missing since being with this agency.

Staff work with foster carers to identify risks to children and young people, and put in place strategies to reduce these. They adopt a balanced approach, recognising that children and young people need to take age-appropriate risks in order to develop and equip themselves for the future.

Foster carers' practice in this area is strong, and minimises risks to children and young people. However, it is not underpinned by coordinated and clearly written information. This has the potential to compromise the registered manager's ability to monitor and review the impact of safeguarding arrangements as needs and circumstances change.

The assessment, training and preparation of foster carers is undertaken in a manner which ensures that the safety of the children and young people is of central consideration. The supervision of staff and foster carers provides a focal point for the identification of areas of individual safeguarding practice development which are then effectively planned for and delivered.

The agency undertakes annual health and safety checks of foster carers' homes to satisfy itself that the children and young people continue to live in safe and secure households.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The suitably qualified and experienced registered manager manages the agency effectively. A sufficient number of staff ensures that the needs of the children and young people and foster carers are met.

Regular and effective monitoring of the quality of the care provided to the children and young people is undertaken by the agency's quality assurance manager. Feedback from foster carers, children and young people, and relevant stakeholders is utilised to inform practice improvement, resulting in better outcomes for the children and young people.

The agency has received a low number of complaints which have been addressed in a careful and timely manner, ensuring that any learning from these is absorbed into practice. The agency ensures that learning from good practice, positive feedback and placement successes is implemented, resulting in continually improved services for the children and young people.

The registered manager forms part of an established management team which successfully models and promotes a strong family and community ethos, which ensures that children and young people are at the centre of all it does. Managers work as a team to ensure that children and young people are provided with all that they need to fulfil their potential. One child said, 'I know all of the staff and managers and they know me. This makes me feel important, and supported in everything that I do. I know my foster carers will always be there for me.'

Staff are well supported and benefit from regular formal supervision and annual appraisal. However, written records do not consistently capture the details of supervision meetings, and this makes it difficult to track decisions, timescales and the actions agreed. Excellent communication provides staff with frequent informal supervision and keeps them up to date with ongoing developments within the agency.

The recruitment of foster carers is in line with the statement of purpose, and the agency maintains a relatively small group of fostering households to sustain the community ethos. The diversity of the foster carer cohort is wide, and the agency is striving to maintain this through future recruitment. The agency has formed excellent relationships with placing local authorities and has a good understanding of the needs of their children and young people, which is reflected in the agency's recruitment strategy.

Foster carers are recruited from a wide geographical area. The agency ensures a high level of localised support for foster carers who live at a distance from the agency offices. Support group meetings take place on a monthly basis in a venue chosen by the foster carers. The agency employs supervising social workers who are

home based and in close proximity to the foster carers whom they supervise. Foster carers and children and young people are not disadvantaged by the area in which they live, as activities organised by the agency are arranged locally.

Training is described by foster carers as a strength of the agency. An impressive scope and range of training is provided. Core courses are run regularly, and agency staff and some panel members attend training alongside the foster carers. Such practice typifies the inclusive style of the agency with all of its stakeholders.

All foster carers access the agency's training hub, which contains a wide range of information and training materials in addition to links to online training courses. The agency considers foster carers' learning styles and has a flexible approach to the delivery of training, ensuring that the training experience for all foster carers is optimised. The agency encourages staff and foster carers to identify external courses that will support them to meet the particular specialist needs of the children and young people placed, or to promote their own professional development.

Foster carers are very appreciative of the comprehensive support provided by the agency. They describe the quality of the relationships they have with all of the staff in glowing terms. Foster carers receive regular supervision and are provided with a summary of their discussion. Foster carers are reviewed annually at a minimum. These reviews are undertaken by independent social workers, who provide objective scrutiny and challenge. The agency has a policy that all first reviews are heard by the panel, and foster carers attend in person.

Managers and staff have developed effective partnerships with placing local authorities and ensure that they work together to meet the needs of the children and young people placed. They are confident to challenge local authority plans when these are not in the best interests of the children and young people, and achieve changes successfully. Staff monitor the stability of placements and, when necessary, identify strategies to enable a placement to continue. The agency acknowledges when a placement move may be necessary and works closely with the local authority to achieve a sensitively planned move, on occasion within the agency. A similar transparent approach exists between the agency and Ofsted. Notifications of significant events are timely and enable the regulator to monitor the agency in between inspections.

Staff and foster carers maintain records of the actions taken with and on behalf of the children and young people, but they are of variable quality. Such records are not carefully organised, which means that information is difficult to elicit. They are not presented in a manner that is conducive to the needs and understanding of children and young people. The value of this information for the children and young people is therefore compromised, should they wish to read these records now or in the future.

The responsible individual maintains detailed financial reports, verified by accountants. All stakeholders are reassured by the financial viability of the agency which, in turn, delivers permanence and stability for the children and young people.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC036488

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