

Family Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Lucy Chapman
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Date of last inspection N/A

Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency was registered in August 2014. It is privately owned and is based in Ramsgate, Kent. At the time of inspection, the agency had seven foster carers, with 12 children in placement. The agency provides emergency, respite, short-term and long-term 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 is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency consistently promotes safe and stable placements for children and young people. Relationships between children, young people and their carers are excellent. Carers demonstrate long-term commitment to the children and young people in their care, who feel part of the fostering family. The majority of children and young people are in permanent placements, with two young people staying put beyond the age of 18. There have been no unplanned placement endings.

Foster carers are overwhelmingly happy with the agency and the support they receive. One carer said, 'we've had 100% support; it's not just with the fostering, it's support for your own family too.' Carers are listened to as part of the professional team and their views influence children's and young people's care. They feel valued by the agency. Foster carer retention is 100%.

Foster carers are equipped to meet the needs of children and young people in their

care. They value agency training and describe this as 'superb'. Foster carer supervision is regular and comprehensively addresses children's, young people's and foster carers' needs. High-quality supervising social worker support promotes excellent care. A carer said, 'my supervising social worker comments have always been constructive and have helped us to overcome problems and improve practice.'

An experienced foster panel with diverse backgrounds provides thorough exploration of issues and a commitment to safeguarding. Thoughtful panel recommendations and careful agency decision making ensure that only applicants with the skills and resilience to meet children's and young people's needs are approved to foster.

The Registered Manager has many years of fostering experience. She is a qualified social worker who has achieved the Level 5 Diploma in Leadership and Management. Agency leaders demonstrate a commitment to high-quality care that promotes optimum outcomes for children and young people.

The agency works positively with partner organisations, ensuring that children and young people receive the support and services they require. Feedback from placing authorities highlights effective partnership working by the agency and a professional, child-centred approach.

Two shortfalls were identified at inspection: recruitment, although robust, was not fully in line with regulatory requirements. In addition, agency training was not sufficiently flexible to enable all foster carers to attend, meaning that some carers lack some mandatory training. Both of these issues have received an immediate management response, with plans in place to rectify shortfalls.

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
<p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20(3)).</p>	<p>20/05/2016</p>

Recommendations

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

Ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for (NMS 20.8).

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The progress of children and young people is exceptional. A local authority social worker said, 'to say the children have blossomed is an understatement; they have all progressed remarkably.'

Children and young people develop excellent relationships with their carers and are part of the family. They attend family celebrations, undertake work experience with family members and keep in touch with their carers when they move to independence. A young person said, 'I've lived here for so long, it's a good place to live; I'm part of the family'. A carer said, 'he's like our son; he's loved and cared about, not just by us but by all of our wider family too.'

Children and young people receive information about their carers before they move in with them. Transitions are sensitively managed, with matching taking account of the referred child as well as children and young people already in placement. This enhances placement stability for all.

Carers respond to children's and young people's individual needs and proactively champion their progress. A local authority social worker said: 'my boys are disabled and the carers have supported them with their special needs, for example, they erected a special climbing construction in their back garden to help with their balance and strength.' Carers' targeted support maximises children's and young people's progress.

All children and young people are engaged in education, work experience or employment. Their attendance is well monitored. There has been no unauthorised absence. The agency maps children's and young people's progress, and additional support is sought for those who need this to maximise their educational progress. Carers actively support the education of children and young people. An independent reviewing officer said, 'the carers have encouraged her to achieve her full potential. They are encouraging her to go to university. They want her to do well and advocate strongly for her.' Children and young people receive the support and encouragement they need, and are able to achieve exceptional outcomes.

Children and young people receive the health services that they require. Individual therapeutic support for children and young people is available in-house where this is an identified need. In addition, therapeutic consultation for carers supports positive care. A foster carer said, 'they gave us access to a systemic therapist immediately to help us to think about our strategies to manage behaviour.' Responsive support for

children, young people and their carers supports highly successful outcomes.

Children and young people receive support to develop a positive identity. Agency lifestory provision helps children and young people to make sense of their situation and take pride in their heritage. A local authority Social Worker said, 'she has a lifestory book, and the carers have a good understanding of her background and are able to answer her questions and support her in dealing with her birth family.' The agency actively supports contact arrangements, even where this is at considerable distance.

Carers offer children and young people wide-ranging opportunities. One child said, 'I love going to our caravan and have learned to ride my bike there.' A carer said, 'we go to "father and son" clay pigeon shooting, it's helping him to learn to focus'. Creative activity provision enables children and young people to learn new skills while undertaking activities that they enjoy.

Young people's independence skills are promoted thoughtfully. One young person helped to create a risk assessment to safely attend a concert in London, and another received support to write a CV and distribute this to local stores. The agency provides independence skills workshops for young people. After attending a money management workshop, a young person said, 'we learned about managing money and it was a real insight; I've started to save up and use my money better.'

The quality of relationships between carers and the children and young people in their care is an overwhelming strength of the agency. Carers demonstrate a long-term commitment. Over half of children's and young people's placements are permanent, and two young people are staying put. All children's and young people's placements are stable. There have been no unplanned placement endings.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Carers who foster with this agency are exceedingly happy with the service and support that they receive. One carer said, 'to be honest, everything is just great and I can't think of anything that could improve the agency'. Another carer said, 'there really is nothing I would want to change, the staff can't do enough for you; they genuinely care and go the extra mile.'

The agency has 100% foster carer retention. In addition, steady recruitment brings additional new and experienced carers. Current foster carers are primarily of a white British heritage, reflecting the local population. Ongoing recruitment aims to develop carer diversity. The agency demonstrates a commitment to recruiting high-quality

carers, who are able to meet the needs of complex children and young people.

Carers in assessment speak highly of the training and assessment process. One carer said, 'the information we got on the skills to foster training was brilliant. The agency [is] really friendly and welcoming, they explained everything. I was really impressed.'

All carers complete their training support and development standards within the required timeframe. Ongoing training equips carers to meet the needs of children and young people in their care. A carer said, 'I love the training; the trainers are really good; we have discussion and learn a lot'. The majority of carers have completed mandatory training. However, some carers, particularly those in full-time employment, have yet to complete some courses. To date, agency training has not been sufficiently flexible to meet carers' needs. Responsive future training plans address this issue.

Carers value supervision with their supervising social worker. A carer commented: 'my supervising social worker is not afraid to challenge us. We brainstorm together and that helps if you are stuck. She is calm and considerate and gives us extra support if things are difficult.' Agency supervision provides carers with purposeful support focused upon the needs of children and young people in placement. Positive relationships between carers and the agency lead to open, honest relationships where carers receive the support that they require. Foster carers, without exception, feel part of the professional team. They feel listened to and that their views influence care planning.

Agency support extends to the whole fostering family. A carer said: 'my supervising social worker speaks to my own children. She makes it her role to make sure they know she is there for them. They feel they can speak to her without needing to talk to us first.'

The fostering panel demonstrates a proactive approach to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and young people. Panel members are from diverse backgrounds and bring wide-ranging experience to inform panel recommendations. The Registered Manager values panel feedback, and this provides quality assurance to the agency.

Careful matching means that the placement of children and young people only happens when carers are able to meet their identified needs. The agency provides carers with any additional training and support required to meet children's and young people's specific needs. Full information is shared with carers prior to placement, and their views are central to placement matching.

The agency works in partnership with placing authorities to review children's and young people's care plans. An independent reviewing officer commented: 'the supervising social worker supports the carers very well and always provides a comprehensive report for the review. The agency has an excellent relationship with the carers, that helps to promote the child's needs very well.' Delegated authority is clearly recorded. This allows children and young people to partake in the activities and receive the services that they need with minimum disruption and delay.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A strong commitment to safeguarding is evident in all aspects of the functioning of the agency. Clear safeguarding policies guide action to keep children and young people safe.

Effective links with the local safeguarding children board (LSCB) provides leaders with up-to-date safeguarding information and training. Consultation with the LSCB and police provides quality assurance for organisational safeguarding policies and practice.

Children and young people speak to their foster carers about their concerns and receive the help they need. One child said, 'I was bullied at school; I told my carer and she went to the school and sorted it out. I haven't had any more problems.' Children and young people know who to talk to within the agency about their concerns. One young person said, 'I know I can contact the managers if I want to talk to them about anything.' A child said, 'I speak to my supervising social worker, she is lovely and friendly and kind.'

Children and young people are in safe, stable placements. There have been no allegations made or matters requiring notification to Ofsted. A new 'missing from care' policy provides clear guidance when children and young people are missing. Missing incidents are extremely rare in the agency. The one incident of a young person missing received effective and timely response, followed by a 'return home' interview.

Agency safeguarding practice undergoes regular review, and updating of risk assessments is in process. New risk assessments more effectively address children's and young people's needs. They clearly identify risks and guide carer and agency actions to maximise children's and young people's safety.

Training and supervision of carers has a strong emphasis on safeguarding. Carers demonstrate a good working knowledge to keep children and young people safe.

Radicalisation and child sexual exploitation training are recent additions to the training programme, bringing improvement to agency safeguarding.

Staff and panel recruitment, in general, complies with regulatory requirements. However, staff recruitment has occasionally occurred without the reasons for leaving previous employment with children and vulnerable adults being verified by the agency, and without a reference from the applicant's most recent employer. All omissions were rectified during the inspection, and recruitment procedures amended to support future recruitment being in full compliance with regulation.

Panel members have up-to-date safeguarding training. Panel practice effectively explores issues and demonstrates a thorough commitment to safeguarding. This protects children and young people.

Unannounced visits to carers' homes are twice yearly. Health and safety assessments are reviewed during these visits, ensuring that foster carers' homes continue to provide a safe environment, and meet the needs of children and young people in placement.

The complaints procedure is well advertised. All children and young people have an individualised 'keep in touch' card and young people's guide, equipping them with contact numbers and helplines should they wish to seek independent advice. Staff, carers, children and young people know how to complain. No complaints have been made. The 'whistleblowing' policy forms part of staff and foster carer induction. No concerns have been raised.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The Registered Manager is a qualified social worker with 15 years of fostering experience. She has attained the Level 5 Diploma in Leadership and Management. Leaders in the agency demonstrate a commitment to achieving high standards of care, and good outcomes for children and young people.

Working relationships with placing authorities are effective. An independent reviewing officer commented that: 'all parties, foster carers, supervising social worker and the young person's allocated social worker work together and take into account the young person's wishes and feelings. Strong effective partnership working improves the progress and outcomes for children and young people.'

The agency provides opportunities for children and young people in placement and their foster families to undertake group activities. This has created a strong

supportive network for carers, children and young people. There is strong emphasis on listening and responding to children's and young people's views. Future agency plans include opportunities for children and young people to engage in organisational development. Currently embryonic, this is an area of ongoing progress.

Managers review quality of care on a quarterly basis. This includes the views of children and young people, foster carers and stakeholders. Good quality management review promotes good practice across the functioning of the agency. Regular monitoring of children's and young people's progress links to the introduction of additional resources, where progress does not meet expectation. An agency support worker provides creative one-to-one support where children and young people have specific needs. Support work includes healthy relationships, employment and work experience, healthy eating, and smoking and substance misuse prevention.

Managers listen to carers, and carers feel valued. One carer said, 'the agency listens to us as much as we listen to them.' Another said, 'we feel listened to; they take our views on very strongly.' Carers share their thoughts and feelings with agency leaders, and their views help to shape ongoing agency development.

Staff supervision is regular and effective, and provides a supportive environment in which staff share and discuss their practice. Supervision places emphasis on the well-being and progress of children and young people, with clear follow-up actions to guide future work.

Appraisal of staff and panel members performance is annual. Its quality is enhanced by the inclusion of feedback from children and young people, carers and professionals. Appraisal includes the review of working practice, identification of developmental needs, and clear aims and objectives for the year ahead. Appraisal promotes staff development and provides the basis to challenge poor practice, should the need arise.

The statement of purpose effectively outlines the agency ethos and service provision. The agency has adopted the Foster Carer Charter, demonstrating its commitment to high-quality care and support for foster carers. Alongside this, the agency children's guide equips children and young people with information about the agency and its foster placement, furnishing them with appropriate knowledge to take action if they are in any way concerned or dissatisfied.

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.