

Focused Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Focused Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency that provides emergency, short and long-term fostering placements for children aged from birth to 18 years. The agency is also able to offer specialist placements to meet specific presenting needs. The agency comprises two social workers, an administrator and the manager. At the time of the inspection there were 11 approved culturally diverse fostering households and 10 children.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The agency is effective at ensuring that children fostered are provided with a safe and caring family environment. The service strives to improve the quality of life and life chances for children and young people. Placing authorities are positive about the agency's matching process and their ability to deliver the agreed care plans. The placements are successful and the stability of the placements is generally well supported.

The service provides a good quality of care, and the outcomes for children and young people are at least good in all areas. Children and young people make significant progress in many cases. They receive care that meets their individual needs and they are kept safe. Additional needs arising from children's health needs, disabilities, education or culture, are met appropriately. There are minimal unplanned changes, and children and young people are fully involved in decision making.

Monitoring of the service is strong. Staff are enthusiastic, and communication and consultation with stakeholders are good. The manager and director effectively share their ideas and skills with each other. Foster carers are carefully selected, and a range of support and training prepares the foster carers, their families and back-up carers for the fostering task. Foster carers are experienced, competent and committed. They are enabled to carry out their role professionally and to a high standard. Foster carers are extremely motivated to provide the best for their foster

children, including after they have left the care system.

The managers are very effective at encouraging staff and carers to achieve high standards in their work. The staff are aware about the legislative framework that underpins their work, which is supported by ongoing training and supervision to improve practice and achieve better outcomes for children and young people. The agency has a range of processes to ensure that staff, children, young people and foster carers can contribute to the development of the agency. There are systems to review the quality of care that look at areas such as consultation with young people, independent reviewing officers and placing authorities, and complaints. A stakeholder described the agency as 'reliable', and went on to say: 'The children placed with this agency have made good progress. I would say this was a successful commissioning decision, incidents of children and young people going missing have lessened and school attendance has improved.'

Managers are very clear about the strengths of this service and the key areas for improvement. Appropriate development plans are in place to address the areas of improvement. These relate to documentary shortfalls, the agency decision maker, and foster carers' support groups.

Areas for 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.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
35 (2011)	ensure that Ofsted is provided with a written report in respect of monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 to improve the quality of foster care provided by the agency. (Regulation 35 (2))	30/08/2012

Recommendations

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

- support foster carers to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily (NMS 7.4)
- ensure the fostering service decision maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service (NMS 23.12)
- ensure that foster carers are supported and encouraged to continue with the

foster care support groups (NMS 21.4)

- ensure the service has a policy and practical arrangements which enable children to remain with their foster carer(s) into legal adulthood. (NMS 12.4)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children and young people are developing well and making good progress in their placements. They experience the stability and commitment of family life from foster carers who are keen to ensure that they achieve their full potential. They have developed strong and realistic attachments with their carers and other members of the household and have an understanding of the reasons for being in care.

Children and young people have their cultural and religious needs met and they have opportunities to develop relationships with people from their own background. They are supported to have contact with their birth families where this is agreed. Children and young people are effectively protected in the large majority of cases from unplanned endings.

Children and young people are encouraged to contribute to the decision-making process concerning their lives. They feel enabled to say how they feel and know that their views are taken into account. Children and young people say that they are happy with the care they are currently receiving. One young person said: 'I love cricket and my carers make sure I have everything that I need when I have to play a match.' He went on to say: 'When I come home and I am tired they always make sure that my cricket things are washed and ready for my next match; yes I am happy there, I like my foster parents.' Another child said: 'I feel more settled where I am now than before. I can talk to my carer although I think I stress her out.' This means that children and young people develop their confidence and are able to view their future more positively.

Children and young people are encouraged to participate and engage in a range of leisure activities with their foster parents and other children. They are encouraged to eat well and develop healthy lifestyles. Children and young people with complex needs are supported where appropriate to learn and take the increasing levels of responsibility for managing their own health and behaviour.

Carers and social workers reported good progress in education. One young person, since being placed with her foster carers, has started attending school and is making consistent progress academically. The young person has undertaken a number of GCSE exams and is looking forward to attending college next year. Education is actively promoted by carers; attendance is very high overall and exclusions are minimal. All children and young people of compulsory school age are participating in some form of education. Some of those children and young people who were underachieving in the past are now on target to meet or exceed the national end of stage tests for their year. Another young person who continues to receive support

from the agency is currently at university. In addition to their academic achievements, children and young people have opportunities to develop their social skills. They feel supported, respected, and loved and their confidence is steadily growing.

Children and young people feel that they are taught skills that will prepare them for adulthood, both in and outside their foster homes. While some older young people have been effectively supported into their own accommodation, there is no policy on how the service supports young people to remain with foster carers into legal adulthood.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

Children and young people are provided with good levels of personalised care specific to their needs. Social workers and carers fully understand the needs of the children and young people and their backgrounds. They respect and celebrate their individuality and differences.

Managers of the agency ensure that there is a long-term strategy to recruit and assess carers. All enquiries from prospective carers are treated fairly. The assessment process focuses on the skills and aptitude of applicants and their capacity to care safely and responsibly. Assessments of carers are conducted in a rigorous, yet open and transparent way. This means that reports are sufficiently robust before they reach panel and thus inform the decision-making process effectively.

Foster carers are very positive about the management of the service and the support and training they receive. Foster carers know that they are well respected and valued members of the team. They receive the information about the child before and during the placement. They are supported to understand and manage relationships with the children's social workers, especially if the information they feel they need from the placing authority is not forthcoming. As a result, foster carers feel that they are able to fully participate in the planning for the child or young person. Foster carers receive training that helps to develop their skills to care for children and young people. In addition, the agency offers foster carers specialist training that takes into account the individual needs of the foster carer and the children and young people in placement.

An efficient panel ensures an in-depth analysis of fostering assessments. The panel is appropriately constituted with experiences from relevant disciplines, including young adults who have had a direct experience of being in care. The chair of the panel is very experienced and provides strong leadership that contributes effectively to driving the quality of the service forward. Panel members are clear about their remit and their responsibilities. The panel provides thorough and rigorous scrutiny of the approval and review of foster carers and there is a strong commitment by all concerned to the success of the service in providing the best possible outcomes for

children. The fostering panel also provides a highly effective quality assurance function and promotes the welfare of the children in the care of the agency at all times. Competent recommendations and decisions are made for all children, including those with the most complex and diverse needs. The agency has suitable decision-making processes, however, the decision maker does not fully meet the criteria as she is no longer employed by the agency in a senior role.

Foster carers are energetic and keen to do their best for children and young people. They provide excellent male and female role models for children and young people. They are appropriately matched with children and establish effective relationships with them. Foster carers ensure that specialist services, such as psychological and advocacy services, are provided to help children and young people progress as much as possible. One stakeholder commented: 'We have no concerns about this agency. They always respond to the annual checks and reviews carried out and provide all up-to-date information requested, such as Criminal Records Bureau checks and health checks on their foster carers, family household and back-up carers.'

Children value the support they receive from their carers and have developed a sense of trust in their carers and the fostering staff. Children and foster carers are happy with the agency and the level of support they receive. One foster carer said: 'I cannot fault them when it comes to support; no matter what time of night I call I always get a reply and they are always calm and offer solutions.' Foster carers were positive about the response and support from the agency in times of crisis. One carer said, 'there is always someone there to help'; another recalled, 'the social worker was up at 02.00 hours supporting me when I had a crisis with the young person'. Foster carers say that the manager and social workers really care, and this is a deciding factor in their continuing to foster children and young people with this agency.

The agency supports carers to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards. All foster carers have completed the training. Foster carers say that in addition to the basic courses, they are encouraged to seek training that will meet their needs and those of the children and young people living with them. Carers are aware about their responsibilities not to physically restrain children and young people and use consequences and incentives. They are particularly mindful of their training in relation to behaviour management and feel that this has impacted on them positively in the way they manage conflict with children and young people. Young people respond well to these interventions and some of their challenging behaviours have minimised over time, leading to fewer incidents. Children and young people are encouraged to make friends, socialise and develop socially acceptable behaviour.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people enjoy safe and secure placements. Children and young people commented that they felt safe and that they know how to complain. They fully understand the complaints information and know how to talk to people to

express any concerns regarding their care. Information regarding independent advocacy services is included in the children's handbook. Any concerns or complaints raised via their foster carers, their social workers as well as the supervising social workers are followed up. Complaints are investigated and responded to generally within timescales. Skills to foster training focuses on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice; this is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster carers also receive training in the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding to ensure an appropriate response to any disclosures or allegations.

The agency promotes a strong ethos and culture of safe caring and provides a strong safeguarding framework for all fostering households. It has a clear process for dealing with allegations which ensures that they are handled in a manner that is in the best interests of children. Placing social workers and commissioners expressed confidence in foster carers' abilities to safeguard children and young people. Managers are fully conversant with safeguarding procedures and consult promptly with other agencies, including regulatory bodies. Complaints and allegations are investigated with due consideration to impartiality. Notifications of serious incidents and other concerning events are carefully monitored. Looked after children and fostering team social workers say that the numbers of allegations of abuse and neglect raised by young people against foster carers is low; these are dealt with effectively and children and carers are well supported by the process of enquiry.

Unannounced visits are carried out annually and more often in response to any concerns. Safer care plans are of a good quality.

Children rarely go missing from care, and if this does happen, foster carers are aware of the correct procedures to follow. The foster carer handbook contains a comprehensive missing from care policy. All foster carers have received and know the content of this policy and are able to implement the current procedures in relation to children going missing. The agency collects data that identifies, monitors and evaluates the overall numbers of incidents, to identify any emerging patterns or trends.

Children benefit from safer recruitment practices and policies. Good recruitment and vetting practice prevents unsuitable people having access to children. There is careful selection of staff, foster carers, fostering households and members of the fostering panel.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

The agency is managed by an experienced, professional and competent team of individuals with the appropriate skills, knowledge and professional qualifications. Members of staff and foster carers and stakeholders speak positively about the agency. They feel that the agency is focused on achieving the best possible

outcomes for children and young people.

The agency listens to the children and young people's views at every opportunity. In addition to the normal routes of seeing the young people on visits to foster carers' homes and annual surveys, children have the opportunity to comment on their care during the foster carers' annual review. This gives children and young people the opportunity to have their views heard. One young person said that she has decided to find a job instead of college and she is being supported in this decision.

Good data collection and evaluation ensure that the activities of the agency are always monitored. A tracking system is in place, which evaluates the progress made by each child. This is to ensure that outcomes for children continue to improve. Children's outcome reports collate vital information about the quality of children's placements and are monitored for any concerns and for forward-planning purposes. The agency has written records to monitor the statutory checks, annual reviews and referrals made. Reports that review the quality of care offered are completed, but copies of these reports are not sent to Ofsted. The impact on the service is minimal; identified shortfalls are addressed and all significant events are reported to the appropriate agencies. The director is personally involved in the operation of the service and meets regularly with the manager and staff of the agency. However, foster carers' forums are not currently operating; as a result the director misses out on an opportunity to consult carers directly and quickly to identify any shortfalls in meeting individual children's needs.

All staff and foster carers receive professional supervision, detailed written guidance, excellent support and training opportunities that impact positively on their practice. Social work staff have their performance individually and formally appraised annually. Training needs are assessed regularly, and opportunities for professional development and learning are good. One staff member was involved with the reviewing of the Children's Workforce Development Council competencies. Workloads of supervising social workers are monitored and evaluated at regular intervals. This enables the agency to provide a good service for children and young people.

The children's guide is clearly written and describes the services and complaints procedure. This is made accessible in different languages as well as in picture format as and when needed. In addition, the foster carers' handbook covers essential policies and procedures, including those relating to safeguarding. The Statement of Purpose clearly identifies the aims and objectives of the agency and provides a clear overview to all parties.

Requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have all been addressed and completed. A range of effective monitoring systems are in place. An annual performance report is also produced and this incorporates the views of placing authorities and young people to drive improvements within the agency.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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.

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 independent fostering agencies.