

Futures for Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency provides support to 58 children and young people in the Essex area. The agency has 48 foster households. The fostering agency is able to provide task centred fostering, short breaks, long term placements, permanent placements and parent and child placements. The fostering agency has contracts with a range of local authorities. The fostering agency has separate offices in Wanstead and Ipswich, which operate under the umbrella of the Southend branch. Further registered offices exist nationally in Camberley, Maidstone, Durham and Milton Keynes. Futures for children also own three independent fostering organisations.

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**

This fostering agency provides a good level of care for children. The provider has taken suitable action to address the requirements and recommendations made at the previous inspection and as a result the quality of care and support has improved. The Registered Manager has recently left and a new manager has been appointed. In the interim suitable management arrangements have been in place.

Children enjoy stable placements where they are nurtured and flourish. Children individually make good progress in relation to their health, education and well-being. Strong relationships develop between children and their carer's as they feel happy, well supported and valued members of the family. One child said 'kids talk about foster care being bad, but for me it's been the best thing that ever happened'.

Children feel safe and protected by carers who have their best interests at heart. Agency staff, work well in partnership with other agencies to ensure children are effectively safeguarded. Children who going missing from care, or are at risk of are child sexual exploitation are safer as a result of being placed with their carers.

There have been recent changes in staffing, however, this has not had a detrimental impact on carers, who continue to be well supervised and supported.

An effective panel ensures that carer’s capacity to provide good quality parenting is core to any approval. The manager has ensured effective systems are in place to regularly monitor the quality of support foster carers provide.

Whilst quality of care is strong the provider has been requested to improve the quality of staff supervision, ensure all carers attend core training and provide suitable panel training.

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
17 (2011)	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. In particular; ensure all carers complete core training. (Regulation 17(1))	09/10/2015
21 (2011)	ensure that all staff receive appropriate supervision. In particular; provide supervision which is of sufficient depth to support staff undertake their role effectively. (Regulation 21(4)(a)).	09/10/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. In particular; ensure suitable and sufficiently frequent training is available to panel members. (NMS 14.8)

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

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Children benefit from nurturing homes where they thrive. Placement breakdown is rare which provides children the opportunity to grow up in stable environments with their siblings, where possible. Where they are placed with carers who are of a different background to them full consideration is given to how their needs can be well met.

Children are welcomed as part of the family and have opportunities to experience good-quality family life and positive parenting. They develop strong bonds with their carers and as a result show increased emotional resilience. Children feel safe and are able to understand some of the risks they place themselves at; this helps them improve their personal safety.

It is testament to quality of the relationships that children enjoy that some have chosen to use terms such as 'auntie' when referring to their carers, another child named their baby after their carer. A number of young people have been able to remain with carers' post 18 under 'staying put arrangements'. Others continue to maintain contact after leaving, for example, one young person supported their younger sibling, to choose their previous carers, when the sibling became a looked after child.

Placing authorities say that carers are competent and caring and make a great difference in children's lives. One referred to carers as having excellent commitment or 'stick ability'. This statement is endorsed by one child who said 'I have caused 'x' so much trouble and been so nasty, but she has always been there for me'.

Children feel consulted about their day-to-day care and have someone to talk to about issues which are worrying them. They understand how to raise any issues of concern with people independent of the agency and have confidence that their concerns will be explored.

Friendships with peers naturally develop and children are able to welcome their friends into their home and on occasion are able to have sleepovers. Children maintain regular contact with the people who are important to them, subject to any court orders.

Children are generally healthy and receive good quality support to lead healthy lifestyles. They are able to access appropriate therapeutic services where required. Children reflect on how they have matured and are able to develop skills in

managing their own behaviour. This has helped them develop more positive relationships and engage more fruitfully in education.

The vast majority of children are making positive educational progress from their starting points, for example, some children who were not attending school at all upon placement, now have 98% attendance. Children know that when key events happen, such as, sports days, parents' evenings and prom, there will be someone there to support them.

Without exception all of the feedback from children about their carers was highly complementary. Comments included 'she saved me and has helped me be the person I am today' and 'she really loves me', 'I'm really part of the family'

Quality of service

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

The fostering agency is held in high regard by local commissioners and placing social workers. Placement matching systems are effective, ensuring children are only placed where carers are able to meet their individual needs. Carers' state there is never pressure applied on them to take placements. Good-quality assessment processes ensure that only suitable carers are approved. Placement breakdown is rare, and has only occurred only where carers or children's safety is compromised.

Carers understand their role and are well supported through regular focused supervision. This means that in times of stress effective intervention is able to be offered. Effective out of hours systems give carers confidence that there is always someone available to give them support and guidance.

All carers complete the training and development standards within suitable timeframes. The agency provides a variety of useful training which equips carers well to meet the needs of children. However, some carers and the majority of second carers have not undertaken core training or key updates training sufficiently frequently in key areas, such as, child protection, safeguarding, first aid and self-harm. This means they may not be up-to-date with changes in statutory guidance and best practice.

Carers work well in partnership with the agency, parents and professionals to ensure children's needs are met. The vast majority of children accompany carers on family events and holidays, the use respite services is therefore infrequent.

Panel processes are effective and robust with a variety of skill base and life

experience available to the panel. Panel has a clear focus on parenting capacity and how carers are able to meet children's individual needs. However, there has been no training provided to panel members for some 15 months, during which time the panel has undergone significant change including at least five new members joining. There is potential for the quality of panel discussions and process to deteriorate if there is not sufficient opportunity, to as a group reflect and develop. The quality of assessments provided to panel is high. Good-quality administrative systems and minute taking effectively support the panel's core functions. Agency decision-making processes are effective and proportionate, any variation from panel recommendations and the reasons for this is clearly documented.

Fostering staff act to ensure placing authorities undertake their statutory duties, such as, the review of children's care plans, and the provision of suitable information particularly delegated authority. They also advocate with local authorities on children's behalf where children disclose concerns about issues, such as, contact arrangements. For some children this has resulted in more child focused arrangements.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement **Good**
outcome:

Children feel safe and are safe. They reflect that they have matured and now have a better understanding about keeping themselves safe. They feel carers are focused on their wellbeing. One child said 'x' makes sure I'm safe, I have always been supported and 'x' is never judgemental'.

Placing authorities state that children are safer and have a better understanding of how to keep themselves safe as a direct result of the support provided by carers. Robust safeguarding is central to the service and staff and carers act swiftly and effectively to any issues of concern.

The agency has established positive multiagency relationships with local safeguarding team's which help keep children safe. One commissioning officer stated staff's local knowledge of key risks helped partner professionals understand particular dangers.

Placing authorities identified a number of examples where children have been very well supported by carers to redress missing from care and child sexual exploitation concerns. One placing authority stated that if they had placed a particular child with any other carer the placement would have broken down due to the high

levels of risk of child sexual exploitation and missing from care. This child has had no instances of go missing from care in the past 12 months and the risk of sexual exploitation is no longer considered a particular risk. The child is therefore safer as a result of living with these carers.

Children have someone they trust and are who they are able to disclose any issues which concerning them. They are provided with information about how to complain or raise any concerns both within and external to the fostering agency. Carers discuss keeping safe, and develop personal strategies for this in line with individual safe care assessments. They also support the children to engage in local youth at risk groups. No concerns have been raised by young people about the agency.

Robust recruitment practices protect children from unsuitable people gaining employment in the agency as either staff or panel members. All staff and panel members are subject to checks on their suitability which are in line with both regulatory and best practice guidance.

Leadership and management

Judgement **Requires improvement**
outcome:

A new manager has taken up post following the recent departure of the previous Registered Manager, who had been in post for three years. Information available regarding the new manager indicates they are appropriately qualified and experienced, however, an application for registration has yet to be submitted therefore their suitability has yet to be evaluated.

Leadership of the agency has been visible and effective, however, has not yet reached good. The provider has ensured the vast majority of requirements set at the last inspection have been met. Staff supervision at the last inspection was noted to be of insufficient frequency which the manager addressed, however, recent supervision provided to staff and acting manager have not been of appropriate depth. For example, the supervision of the acting interim manager who has very limited senior experience does not explore their role, how they are going to develop their skills and the support required to assist them. A further example was, very little discussion regarding case management or how the supervising social worker was being supported with prospective carer assessments. A number of staff have recently left the agency and although the remaining staff say they feel valued and well supported, the standard of supervision requires improvement to ensure staff are effectively supported and developed.

The provider has as a result of recent staff departures implemented consultation

systems for staff so that they can express any concerns direct to senior managers. Vacancies within the agency have been filled with appropriately qualified and experienced staff.

The agency has developed highly effective working relationships with local authorities and partner agencies. Commissioning agencies hold the agency in high regard. All partner professionals comment positively on the stability of placements and the quality of care provided both to individual children and across the agency as a whole.

Children have opportunities to have fun and engage in the community, for example, attending pantomimes or through trips to a local theme park. However, the recent changes in staffing have slowed down the services ability to creatively engage with children and young people about the overall service.

The agency has invested in training for carers, however, has not had sufficiently effective systems to ensure all carers attend the training which the agency considers essential to effectively undertake their role.

Individual outcomes for children are comprehensively monitored through supervising social worker visits and the six monthly 'journey of the child' review. The progress of children and how effective their carers have been in promoting positive outcomes is assessed as part of carer's annual review.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are useful documents which effectively outline the services available. The provider is exploring the provision of the children's guide in alternative formats which will further enhance its accessibility.

Complaints about the agency are few, however, any received are dealt with transparently and effectively within a timely manner. A third tier independent review of a complaint gives additional depth to the process.

The agency has robust systems for monitoring outcomes for children as a group which aid effective monitoring of the quality of service and feed into a comprehensive review of the quality of care. The provider therefore with the recent implementation of improved staff consultation systems has a good sense of areas of strengths and potential growth.

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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.