

Futures For Children

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Mark Blesky
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Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency's head office is based in Maidstone, Kent. Fostering households are located across the county and recent company expansion now includes additional regional offices throughout the country. The agency provides for a variety of placements which includes; short and long term, emergencies, bridging, enhanced, for example, disability, illness, sibling groups and parent and child placements. All social workers employed by the agency are qualified and experienced and other employees include a qualified director of therapy and sessional workers. The service was registered in 2007.

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 is a good fostering service providing well matched and stable placements where young people thrive. The importance of family and co-operation is a philosophy that underpins and permeates through the service from the Responsible Individual to frontline staff and carers.

Young people feel engaged in their care and valued by their carer's, they feel part of the family and able to express their views and wishes. Strong and effective leadership and management ensure good quality supervision is regularly undertaken. Carers say that this provides a supportive and reflective forum for them to express themselves honestly and objectively.

Social work staff are motivated and committed demonstrating competent child-centred practice. This inspires carers in their professional development and practice.

Young people's health and education are appropriately prioritised and promoted through effective monitoring systems and practice oversight. This ensures young people are encouraged and supported to reach their full potential in later life and make good and very good progress from their starting points.

Management oversight is visible and supportive, guiding staff in their day-to-day practice and promoting the development of the agency. Good practice is evident and measurable within all key aspects of practice, enhancing young people's positive experiences of foster care.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

Ensure foster carers are trained in health and safety issues and have guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. Avoidable hazards are removed as is consistent with a family home. (NMS 10.3)

Ensure that, subject to the child's age and understanding, the fostering service ensures the child receives the Children's Guide at the point of placement and that the foster carer explains the contents of the Children's Guide in a way that is accessible. (NMS 16.3)

Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. (NMS 19.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people thrive in stable placements receiving good quality care from nurturing and supportive foster carers. Well organised matching and pre-placement planning ensures that young people are only placed with carers that are able to meet their needs effectively.

Young people are supported to maintain good links with their families and friends. They are able to stay overnight as appropriate and visit friends in the wider community. Young people feel welcome and part of the family; carers place great importance on this. This is demonstrated by the considerable time and effort the carers and the agency undertake creating a 'welcome to our family' pack, arranging introductions and home visits.

Young people say that they feel part of the family, they are valued, respected and contribute to family life. Relationships are harmonious and productive; young people appropriately rely on their carers for guidance and support. Carers have worked effectively with young people that may have previously found trusting difficult. This has resulted in young people gaining increased confidence and emotional resilience. One young person commented 'my carers know me, they understand me and help me make good decisions'.

Young people behave well and take increasing levels of responsibility for their behaviour. This is because they are settled, have formed and sustained effective relationships with their carer's and know that they can talk to them about anything. Young people therefore do not have demonstrate conflict with their carer's and work with them when times may be more difficult.

Young people know that their views, wishes and feelings are valued. They are told how to make representations or complaints. They feel these will be listened to and understood. If young people wish to raise concerns outside of the agency, they are supported to contact an advocate or an independent party for help.

Complaints are rare in this agency, the last complaint was recorded in May 2014 for a more minor matter. This was dealt with effectively, investigated and the complainant appraised of the outcome with no further action resulting.

Young people benefit from good quality healthcare through regular attendance at the core medical services and the availability of more specialist services should they need it. They learn about good health through the guidance and support they receive from their carer's. Young people also understand how lifestyle choices can impact negatively on their health, such as smoking and using substances and subsequently

reduce these behaviours accordingly.

High school attendance, over 97%, is maintained by young people along with good achievements in studies, taking into account their needs and starting points. Some young people who had previously refused school or had fragmented attendance now attend regularly and consistently. Young people enjoy school and learn to understand the benefits of education and study. They feel supported by their carers who liaise and communicate effectively with their schools and colleges, attend open days, parental consultations and other events. One young person commented 'my carers think school is really important and will help me get a good job'.

All young people spoken to spoke positively about their carer's, their carer's families and their membership within the family. One young person said simply 'this is my home and I love it here'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Social workers and other professionals hold the agency in high regard and comments received from professionals included 'these carers have been great advocates for this young person, challenging the school and promoting their education and their social development'. Another professional commented 'these carers have worked tirelessly to ensure young people achieve contact with their families'.

Foster carers have had a wide range of experience, knowledge and training ensuring that they are able to meet the diverse needs of children in line with the agency's statement of purpose. Supervision is described by carers as demanding and challenging; this enables them to develop their professional role and skills in caring for young people. Carers are motivated and inspired through supervision with one carer commenting 'supervision enables me an objective overview of my practice and the chance to reflect'.

Carers have an in-depth understanding of looked after children which enables them to be effective and tenacious advocates for young people. They understand the importance of clear and concise communication and demonstrate this through their record keeping and report writing. They are confident to challenge professionals and question decisions to ensure young people receive the best service. One Social Worker commented, 'it was as a result of this carer knowing this child and their educational needs so well that enabled them to appropriately challenge and improve educational planning for this young person'.

Effective training is provided to all carers, which includes both mandatory and more specialist training relevant to the child in placement. Carer's increase their skills and knowledge base through regular and relevant training programs, which enables them

to meet the needs of young people more effectively. All carers have completed the training development standards in accordance with the agency's timescales, which has increased their confidence as learners. One carer commented 'this agency is different from most, we can request any training that we like, the agency always considers our requests and often meets them'.

The fostering panel provides rigorous assessment of foster carers and effective quality assurance of the agency. Panel members have a wide range of skills and experience enabling them to make thoughtful and insightful decisions about carers' suitability and the type of children that they can look after. Recommendations are thoughtful and considered; they are articulated well within panel minutes enabling the agency decision maker to make objective and reasoned arguments to support recommendations for approval.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people feel safe, because they understand risks and how to reduce them. This is because their carers work closely with them, helping them to understand safety and the risks around them. As a result young people are able to take increased responsibility for themselves, reduce risks through better decision making and keep themselves safer.

Online safety, social networking and child exploitation has been a particular focus of the agency. There are enhanced training programmes and targeted supervision for staff and foster carers. Extremism training is just beginning to be rolled out to staff and this will further complement the clear focus on the current challenges young people face.

Placement plans, initial matching and risk assessments highlight areas of risk and harm, they firmly establish carer's duties to protect young people in placement. This focus on safeguarding enables carers to understand the impact of abuse, complex behaviours and reasons why young people may be particularly vulnerable. Plans are detailed and comprehensive articulating individual and more diverse aspects of young people and their needs. Two young people spoken to say they are encouraged to contribute to the plans and can make their wishes and feelings known.

Young people rarely go missing from their foster homes and prior to March 2015, four people had been missing for less than 24 hours in the past year. Since March 2015, only one person went missing, for less than 24 hours. This is a reduction to the already uncommon missing episodes. When there are episodes of young people going missing, risk assessments are reviewed and any additional supervision and support for the young person is put into place. Analysis is undertaken by the agency

detailing action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return and any reasons given by the child for running away.

The agency has worked extremely hard and established missing person policies with 14 police authorities around the country successfully agreeing joint protocols. The agency has demonstrated effective planning for young people currently in placement. They have been proactive in establishing protocols with authorities that have yet to place children.

Young people are provided with contact information, help lines and support from carers and an advocate should they wish to raise any concerns or discuss worries. In addition, the agency social workers provide a 'seen alone' element to home visits. This ensures young people meet with the supervising social workers frequently and have a chance to speak freely. This provides further opportunity for young people to share any worries. Young people spoken to say 'if I have any worries I will speak to my carer's and I know how to speak to my social worker if I need to'. All young people knew that they have a right to complain and how to do this.

Robust recruitment practices ensure that young people are protected from those that are considered unsuitable. Careful checking of references and undertaking statutory checks demonstrate a rigorous approach to the recruitment process. File recording is generally well maintained. However, in two specific cases information was not presented clearly. It is acknowledged that this was isolated to the presentation of the information rather than any fundamental deficits in the recruitment process.

It was noted in one foster carer's home that although there is a gas boiler, no carbon monoxide detector had been fitted. Health and safety checks had failed to identify the absence of this detector. Upon discovery of this immediate action was taken, a detector fitted and a complete review of the health and safety checks system undertaken.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The Registered Manager has been in post for over a year. She took up the post with a wealth of related experience and transferable skills. She has worked in a similar field having specialised in family support centres. The manager has also spent significant time managing social care staff bringing both skills and qualifications in social work and management.

Leadership and management are described by both the staff and the foster carers as strong and effective. All staff unanimously agree that she is very knowledgeable and

approachable using her wealth of experience to guide and support staff effectively. Staff are supervised by the Registered Manager and say she is reflective, using supervision to focus on young people's care.

The Registered Manager is visible to carers and plays a significant role in placement oversight. This provides carers with the opportunity to talk and discuss any matters important to them. Carers described her as hands-on, approachable and interested in their views and comments. She has used these consultation opportunities to shape and develop training for carers and staff, reinforcing the importance she places on listening to others.

Effective monitoring and analysis of individual outcomes for children takes place through supervising social worker visits. These are collated into six monthly review reports entitled 'journey of the child'. This then provides essential information on young people's progress at the carer's annual review. The development of computer monitoring systems has also allowed information to be easily accessible enabling prompt and effective oversight of all young people and carers.

Quality assurance is undertaken regularly, it includes the performance of the panel and the quality of reports. It also covers the progress of young people's education, health and the agency's performance in promoting positive outcomes for young people.

As a result of the quality assurance systems new training initiatives are being developed in respect of unaccompanied asylum seekers. The computer system, CHARMS, is also being rolled out to foster carers. This will give them instant access to records and the means to be able to send and receive information more effectively. Key documents have also been updated, which include safeguarding and child protection, e-safety and the notification procedure.

The statement of purpose is clear and concise, detailing the services provided by the agency and the manner in which the agency operates. All social workers and commissioners are provided with a copy of the statement of purpose and upon request, stakeholders and interested parties also. This ensures transparency and demonstrates a collaborative approach to working in partnership. Professionals spoken to commented positively on the stability of placements and the quality of care provided. They gave examples of good practice and spoke highly about the staff and carers.

All young people are provided, at the time of placement, with children's guides, enabling them to learn about the placement and their rights. However two young people spoken to were unable to locate their guides and carers were unclear where these guides were. In another example, a young person was only able to produce a guide that was significantly out of date and contact information had become

obsolete.

Notifications have recently been reviewed and all staff have received formal training in making effective notifications. Prior to this training, some notifications were unclear and not concise. Following training, all staff are now clear when to raise notifiable events under schedule 7 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. Systems now in place ensure that these are completed and the Registered Manager is able to evidence that appropriate follow-up action is undertaken.

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.