

Fostering for You

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC448784
Inspection date	9 May 2016
Inspector	Lee Kirwin
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	14 October 2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency (IFA) is a privately owned organisation based in south London within the London Borough of Wandsworth. The fostering agency is a small agency with 19 approved foster carers and 23 children and young people, placed within 16 households. The fostering agency is able to provide short- and long-term placements, as well as intermediate 'bridging', respite, emergency placements, parent and child, short breaks and special placements. At time of this inspection, there were no short-break placements but there was one parent and child placement.

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 provider has made significant improvements since the last full inspection. The agency has improved the quality of training for foster carers, particularly in relation to behaviour management and promoting positive behaviour. This means that foster carers have the skills, knowledge and support to help young people through times of crisis.

Some areas of the service are not yet good. This is because, despite detailed referral information, there are some examples where young people are placed with carers

who are unable to meet their needs. This means that some unplanned endings occur when they could have been avoided.

The fostering panel is very experienced and is effective in making sure that foster carers are suitable for the role. However, in one example they did not seek employment references for a foster carer who had recently transferred from another agency. This error was rectified and there were no concerns about the carer's suitability to foster.

The agency does not provide foster carers with advice and guidance from a child psychologist, as stated in the agency's statement of purpose. This post has been vacant for 12 months. This means that foster carers cannot access, without delay, expert help to manage complex behaviours.

Foster carers work creatively in partnership with parents, and this sometimes helps them return home to live with their families. When this is not possible, the agency provides nurturing and stable placements where young people thrive and feel at home.

Foster carers work in close partnership with schools. They regularly check on young people's progress and make sure that young people get extra support when they need it. This means that children make good progress in education, and some achieve exceptional levels of attainment.

Young people are safe. Foster carers are alert to any signs that young people may be in danger. They take action to reduce risks and work effectively in partnership to keep young people safe.

Young people enjoy living with their carers. They feel cared for and fully included as part of the family. Placing authority social workers comment very positively about the care and commitment shown by foster carers. They feel that young people make excellent progress.

The interim manager is very experienced in the role and has made a positive difference to improve the service. She has a clear, child-centred vision and is visible within the service. She closely monitors outcomes for young people and takes action to provide extra support. She intervenes to improve the service, where this is needed. However, there are no effective mechanisms to gather the views of young people to help to develop the service further. This was a shortfall at the previous full inspection.

The agency supervising social worker is competent. She provides good quality support to young people and foster carers. She works in partnership effectively with professional networks and intervenes appropriately to make sure that young people are safe.

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 within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Regulation 3: (5) Subject to paragraph (6), the fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose. This is with particular reference to providing advice and guidance from a child psychologist to foster carers.	1 September 2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the registered person should take account of the following recommendations.

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service (NMS 1.7).
- Ensure that children are carefully matched to a foster placement. Foster carers have full information about the child (as set out in standard 3.9) (NMS 11.2).
- Ensure that, once placed, a child is not removed from a foster carer who is willing and able to continue caring for the child, unless that is in their best interests, taking the child's current wishes and feelings into account, and decided (other than in an emergency) through the child's care planning process. If a placement move occurs in an emergency the fostering service informs the responsible authority within one working day (NMS 15.3).
- Ensure that checks are carried out in line with regulation 26. In particular, seek references from any past or current employer to inform the recommendations and decision as to their suitability for the role (NMS 13.5).
- Ensure that areas of concern, or need for additional support, that are identified between reviews are addressed. Such matters identified between reviews are addressed at the time that they are identified, where appropriate, rather than waiting for a review (NMS 13.9).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A vast majority of young people live in stable placements with carers who can meet their needs. There are a few isolated examples where young people have moved in an unplanned way.

Young people comment positively about their experiences of living with their foster families. They feel cared for and part of the family. One young person described how her carer had helped her and her foster brother through 'harsh times'. She described how she was not attending school when she first arrived, but is now achieving excellent results and plans to go to university.

Foster carers work closely with schools to make sure that they know how young people are progressing. They advocate strongly to make sure that young people get the extra resources they need to succeed. Foster carers place importance on educational achievement, and support young people with homework. This makes a positive difference and encourages young people to realise their full potential.

Young people have the support, encouragement and resources that they need to pursue hobbies and interests. They join clubs, participate in sports and learn to play musical instruments proficiently. Foster carers make sure that young people can develop healthy friendships, and make their friends welcome in the foster home.

Young people participate in all aspects of their foster family life. They go to family events, and on trips and holidays. Respite care is seldom used, and only when this is in a young person's best interests. Young people develop secure attachments. They feel cared for, and this has a positive impact on their emotional development. This helps them to make more positive choices and reduces behaviour that is potentially harmful.

Foster carers understand that young people's birth families are important to them. They make adjustments to help them overcome the difficulties of being away from home and support them to maintain contact where possible. In one example, a foster carer worked closely with a young person and her parent to plan a move back home. She continued to provide this support after the placement ended. This helped to ensure that the young person successfully returned to live with her mother.

Foster carers provide clear boundaries and expectations in the home. Young people have structured routines, and this helps to ensure that they enjoy excellent attendance and are well prepared for school. They are encouraged to contribute to looking after the home and learn valuable skills for independence.

Placing authority social workers speak highly of the quality of care provided to young

people. One social worker described the foster carer as 'fantastic'. She commented further that a young person who previously threatened to self-harm no longer does so and is making exceptional progress. Another placing authority social worker said that, 'carers consistently go over and above what is expected of them to support young people'.

Young people are healthy. Foster carers promote healthy lifestyles and ensure that they have regular health checks. If young people are unwell or have complex health needs, foster carers ensure that they get the treatment that they need.

Young people know how to complain and feel that, within the home, their views are taken seriously. They often contribute to foster carer reviews and regularly speak to the agencies that supervise social workers. This means that they do not feel isolated, and can raise problems and concerns outside of the foster home.

Many young people are in long-term placements. Some remain living in homes where they have been fostered, and now live permanently. Young people who need to can often stay beyond their 18th birthday. Young people who leave foster care frequently return to visit, and continue to benefit from support from their foster carers. One young person, who planned to leave at 18 and go to university, was very confident that she could return to visit and stay there when she wanted or if she needed to.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The agency does not always pay close attention to the needs of young people or the capabilities of foster carers when matching placements. They do not always take action to review unplanned endings and to look for any patterns that may indicate areas for development for foster carers. This places unnecessary strain on foster carers and increases the risk of unplanned endings for young people. In one example, a mother and child with complex needs were placed with a carer who had no experience or training in this area.

The vast majority of placements are well matched. Foster carers comment that the current placement officer has made a positive difference to matching. They feel that she knows them and their families very well. She consults with them closely before offering placements. They do not feel under pressure to accept a placement if they have concerns. The agency generally makes good use of referral information and plans well to secure extra resources, if it is felt that young people may need extra help to settle and succeed.

The agency makes sure that placements can meet the cultural needs of young people. When they are not matched culturally, foster carers make provision to ensure that young people can enjoy care that supports them to explore their faith and culture. For example supporting young people to attend their chosen place of worship.

The fostering panel is suitably qualified and provides insightful feedback to the agency on the quality of information presented to panel. It explores all relevant issues and concerns in order to help to inform its views as to whether a prospective foster carer is suitable for the role. The panel chair provides clear direction and leads on the learning and development needs of the panel. This makes sure that members' knowledge is up to date. She is extremely knowledgeable and very experienced in fostering related practice, policy and procedure. Despite this, one foster carer was recently recommended for approval without references being obtained from her most recent employer. This was an isolated example, which the agency rectified, and checks revealed no concerns.

The agency decision maker is experienced in the role. He pays close attention to information presented to panel and explores any areas of concern before approving recommendations. Apart from the single example mentioned above, his decisions are based on evidence and are sound. He regularly observes panel meetings and provides feedback to improve the panel's performance.

Foster carers receive regular training. They undertake 'skills for fostering training' as part of their induction for the role. They also achieve their training, support, and development standards within 12 months. They undergo annual reviews to ensure that they remain suitable for the role. Reviews are informed by detailed assessments by an independent social worker. The agency actively seeks the views of young people and relevant professionals to inform foster care reviews.

Supervising social workers undertake monthly supervision visits to foster carers. They visit more frequently when extra support is necessary to manage complex needs. Supervision focuses on safeguarding issues and supports carers to develop strategies to help young people to make progress. Foster carers appreciate the support provided by the agency and comment that they feel there is always someone available if they need to talk. They also enjoy regular foster carer support groups, as these give them an opportunity to share their experiences and learning with other foster carers.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young people are safe. Foster carers undertake child protection training and are vigilant to signs that a young person may be at risk of harm. When young people are missing from care, they take action to ensure their safe return. They share information promptly with the police and the placing authority. One young person commented that her foster carer 'worries just like a mum'. Most young people do not go missing. They return at the expected time, and foster carers always know where they are. Foster carers work particularly well with parents to make sure that they share information and work together to help young people to stay safe.

Supervising social workers have good knowledge of child protection procedures. They advocate effectively within the professional network to ensure that child protection concerns are addressed, in partnership and promptly. They complete a comprehensive risk assessment for all young people. This highlights any dangers and identifies the action needed to reduce risks. These assessments are updated in the light of any new concerns or when risks are reduced. Foster carers manage risks with consideration to the age and understanding of the young person. They do not impose measures that are unnecessarily restrictive or that would prevent them from taking some risks in order to develop independence skills.

The agency closely monitors young people who are at risk. It provides additional support workers to work directly with young people. This helps young people who are unsettled to engage in positive activities and gives them an independent person to share their concerns with. This helps both foster carers and young people to have some space to reflect on what might need to change. This helps to overcome difficulties that could otherwise lead to placement breakdown.

Supervising social workers undertake unannounced visits to the home to ensure that standards of care are consistent. They meet with young people alone, so that they feel free to share any concerns. They also complete regular checks of the home to ensure that it is a safe environment for young people. Foster carers are trained in safer care practices. They are mindful of situations that could make young people feel uncomfortable. They take care to manage risks in such a way that young people experience a normal family life and feel comfortable in the home.

Foster carers are alert to the dangers of child sexual exploitation. They take steps to make sure that they closely monitor young people and share concerns with the agency social workers. Foster carers adhere to an e-safety policy to reduce the risk of grooming or online bullying, and to prevent young people from accessing inappropriate material. They are also alert to the risk of young people being vulnerable to radicalisation.

The agency takes all allegations seriously, and takes prompt action to ensure that young people are safe. It follows the correct procedures and works in partnership with placing authorities to make sure that any concerns are investigated thoroughly. A local authority designated officer for child protection remarked that the agency staff were professional, child focused and open to learning.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The registered manager's post is currently vacant, An interim manager is in place and she has applied to register. She is experienced in the role and has made positive improvements to address most of the shortfalls highlighted in the previous full inspection. Foster carer training and practice in relation to promoting positive behaviour are effective and help to support children with more complex needs.

Monitoring and administration of medications have improved, and there is better monitoring of health and safety in the foster home. The agency has also appointed a new panel chair to improve its effectiveness.

One recommendation from the previous inspection remains unmet. There is no reliable system in place to gather the views of young people in order to inform service development. This misses a valuable opportunity to understand the experience of both young people in care and the foster carers' birth children.

Management oversight is not yet effective enough to ensure that high standards of care are consistent. . In addition to shortfalls in relation to matching, the agency failed to take action to learn from a number of unplanned endings with a particular foster carer. This was an isolated example, but had a significant impact on the experiences of young people.

The manager is able to reflect on practice and learn from mistakes. She is 'hands on' in her role, and is visible to staff and foster carers. This means that she knows the carers and young people well and that they feel able to approach her for support. The supervising social worker appreciates this and feels that she is well supported by the manager.

The agency has effective partnerships with placing authorities. It communicates promptly and presents information professionally at network meetings. The manager is able to advocate strongly on behalf of young people, and makes sure that the experience and knowledge of foster carers contribute to young people's plans.

The responsible individual works closely with the manager as part of an effective management team. He provides support, direction and guidance, which means that the manager does not feel isolated in the role and always has another professional to talk to if situations are challenging. This helps to create a calm and supportive environment for agency staff.

The agency has recently introduced an electronic recording system. This is working well and provides good management information. The manager is able to use this information to monitor the quality of care, spot any trends or shortfalls and take action to improve the service. She is able to access useful data in relation to the outcomes for young people. This enables her to be aware of what difference the service is making to young people.

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.