

The Foster Care Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC032330
Inspection date	15-19 June 2015
Inspector	Maire Atherton Lucy Chapman
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Unit 6, Riverside Business Centre, Brighton Road, SHOREHAM-BY-SEA, West Sussex, BN43 6RE
Telephone number	01273 463 100
Email	Luisa.Halloran@thefostercareagency.org.uk
Registered person	The Foster Care Agency
Registered manager	Mrs Luisa Halloran
Responsible individual	Mr Iain Anderson
Date of last inspection	25/06/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This agency is part of the National Fostering Agency (NFA) which owns eight other fostering agencies throughout England. It also operates fostering services in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The fostering service offers foster placements to children and young people on a planned or emergency basis, for short and long-term duration, for bridging and for respite care. The service also offers placements for sibling groups and for parents and their children.

At the time of this inspection the agency had approved 38 fostering households and there were 47 children and young people in 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

This agency has made significant progress since the last inspection. A period of instability and change followed the last inspection, including the appointment of a new Registered Manager. This dynamic and enthusiastic manager leads by example and, through her energy and drive, communicates the ambitions of the service to the whole team. The cohesive staff team is committed to ensuring that children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their needs and effectively safeguard and promote their well-being.

The recruitment of foster carers has a strong momentum and the selection and assessment process is robust, timely and ensures only suitable people are approved. As a consequence placement stability is good and children and young people thrive and make good progress in families that they can feel part of.

Foster carers are very well supported, although the records of this do not reflect the service outlined by foster carers. Three recommendations are made in respect of recording and one about the frequency of unannounced visits. Training is strength of the agency and the majority of foster carers enjoy the learning experience and use this to inform their work with children and young people. Some foster carers are more reluctant to engage in training and this is the subject of a recommendation. Additional support through therapeutic intervention or direct work is beneficial in equipping foster carers and promoting individual identity for the children and young people placed.

The agency works in partnership with the children and young people, professionals and stakeholders. The views of all are important and are sought and used to inform developments in the agency.

Areas for improvement

There are no statutory requirements set.

Recommendations

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

engage all foster carers in writing their personal development plans to set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience (NMS 20.5)

improve the recording of foster carers supervision to fully demonstrate how the supervision and support provided complies with the relevant standard (NMS 21.8)

evidence how decision making in respect of identified risks and risk taking is updated in the light of new information (The Children Act Guidance and Regulations Vol. 4, para. 3.64)

ensure that unannounced visits take place at least annually (NMS 21.8)

ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (NMS 26.6)

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

Judgement outcome: Good.

Foster carers have developed child-friendly profiles so that young people have access to information prior to moving in. Where the move is planned in advance children and young people are also given the opportunity to visit foster carers, or foster carers visit them, this provides a good foundation to the placement. One child spoke very positively about the experience of a series of weekend overnight stays.

Children and young people are well looked after, happy and settled in placement. One child described the foster carers as 'fun, funny and loving'. Children and young people are safe; they feel comfortable living with their foster carers. They have developed or are developing secure attachments with their foster families. One child wrote, 'I love my foster family as my real family'. Their care plans are understood, and reviewed appropriately. Unplanned endings are rare, significantly lower than national comparators, and 'staying put arrangements' (to remain in foster care beyond age 18) are supported. Children and young people feel part of the foster carer's family. They have overnight stays with friends and are able to participate in a range of social and educational opportunities.

Children and young people are offered a wide range of activities and other opportunities that support their individual interests. Children and young people talk positively about the things they do, for example, football, karate, ice-skating, scouts and youth clubs. This leads to improved self-esteem and confidence. Contact is promoted appropriately. A social worker commented, 'the foster carer supports contact very well, especially with the mother. The foster carer emphasises the positive.' Children and young people's views are seen as central to the agency. They are given ample opportunity to express their feelings, wishes, and views. Their voices are heard and responded to in their day-to-day care. They know how to complain and seek advocacy if they wish to, the information to support this is readily available. They say they would speak to foster carers if they had any concerns.

Young people are supported to take age-appropriate risks, enhancing their personal development and learning new skills. The agency has been proactive in working in partnership with relevant professionals to reduce risk and educate and encourage young people to keep themselves safe in the rare instances where this is an identified need.

Children and young people are actively supported by their foster carers to lead healthy lifestyles. Children and young people know what a healthy diet is and speak enthusiastically about foster carers 'cooking everything from fresh' with very occasional fast food treats. Foster carers are provided with training opportunities to support children and young people with specific health needs. The agency also supports foster carers in sourcing additional services where there is an identified need.

Children and young people are positively engaged in education. There have been only limited fixed term and no permanent exclusions. Foster carers have established good links with local schools that support children and young people in making good progress and achievement. Social workers report that education is very well supported and foster carers are pro-active in ensuring children and young people living with them participate in opportunities provided by the school, such as trips abroad. A social worker described the foster carer as promoting education by 'advocating in meetings, ensuring their voices are heard and their aspirations are encouraged'. An example of this was recent attendance by a young person at a three day residential to gain a taste of university life. Education feedback reported 'excellent attendance, in appropriate uniform and good communication'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency is robust in its recruitment practices. There is an effective carer recruitment officer, who is part of a wider national team within NFA. This network provides good support, sharing resources and intelligence that informs recruitment. There is a focus on engaging particular demographics who the agency believes are most likely to become approved as foster carers, for example by targeting selected events and venues. The daily liaison between the recruitment and referrals officers ensures that recruitment is also targeted at the current needs outlined by local authorities seeking placements. The agency considers referrals in detail and is proactive in seeking additional information. On the basis of this information the referrals officer constructs proposals to local authorities that demonstrate how the foster carers and agency would support a complex placement, for example by the provision of therapeutic input to the foster carers and/or a support worker for the child.

This is a child-focused agency, evident in all aspects of their work. Foster carers talk enthusiastically about the skills to foster course, how it engages them and makes them think about the children they may be caring for in the future. Foster carers said, 'it was very informative' and, 'I felt I really learned on the skills to foster course, it gave me plenty to mull over'. Assessments focus on how the applicants' own life experiences equip them to care for other people's children. As recommended in the last report they clearly set out the information required to enable decision making. Independent form F assessors are very complimentary about the role of the agency. They say that they are given an excellent level of support at every stage of the process, from administration through to management decisions, with an emphasis on ensuring that only suitable people are recommended for approval. Assessors are encouraged to explore any emerging concerns with the management and there is a strong ethos on providing a thorough and robust assessment. The management team supports discontinuing assessments where the assessor does not think the applicants will make good foster carers. As a result of thorough preparation and assessment, foster carers have a good understanding of their role and that of others involved in the placement of a child in their care.

Foster carers describe how they enable children and young people to feel part of the family. The responses and observation of children and young people indicates that foster carers do this successfully. Foster carers maintain this even when a child or young person deliberately distances themselves from family life, so they can re-engage easily. There is limited use of respite arrangements, which may be used to underpin the stability of placements. Foster carers are skilled in establishing and maintaining contact and working relationships with people who are significant to the child or young person where this is possible and in their best interests. Placing social workers speak highly of the effective communication they have with foster carers and how they enable and support contact with family members that meets the needs of the child or young person placed.

There is a dedicated trainer who works across several NFA services. Foster carers spoken with were unanimous in their appreciation of training. They praised the range of courses offered, the trainer's engaging style of delivery and her prompt response to emerging needs. Foster carers describe training as 'pertinent and engaging; the tasks bring home the poignancy of the experiences of children and young people who are fostered'. They gave examples of how the trainer sources information and courses, including use of on-line for those who cannot attend on the day, and sending emails about trends in current affairs that can be used to inform practice. All foster carers approved for more than a year have successfully completed the training, support and development standards in foster care or equivalent as recommended in the last report. The Registered Manager is rigorous in chasing the minority of foster carers who are reluctant to attend training, although in a very few cases this does not always achieve the desired outcome. As a result the management are looking at a new approach to drive this forward and panel are actively considering their role in supporting the agency in this. Support groups are not routinely well attended by foster carers and this is being reviewed to determine how to encourage and promote attendance. The group 'Men who Foster' was an exception and was well received and appreciated.

Foster carers cannot speak highly enough of the personal and professional support they receive. They are appreciative of the fact that they know who will pick up the phone when they ring, both during and out of office hours, meeting a recommendation of the last report. Comments by foster carers included: 'every time there was an issue I could speak to someone, even at 11 o'clock at night'; 'the new supervising social worker has delivered everything I expected, she is brilliant, she listens and delivers what she says she will' and, at a time of bereavement, 'the agency was there for me and checked I was fine.' The formal records of supervision do not fully reflect or do justice to the work of the supervising social workers as outlined by foster carers. The work is reflected in the stability of placements for children and young people and the agency support for 'staying put' arrangements.

A commissioner said, 'I believe they think carefully before making offers of placements'. This is the start of a sound approach to making an appropriate placement that meets the needs of the child or young person well. The agency promotes and enables good working relationships between foster carers and supervising and placing social workers. They work together effectively, in the vast majority of cases, to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. Placing social workers are complimentary about the frequency and quality of

communication they receive from foster carers, which informs the planning. Where there are complexities in the placement foster carers are fully involved as part of the team alongside their supervising social worker. Foster carers act as strong advocates for the children in their care, enabling them to participate in overseas school trips for example.

The diverse and experienced panel is effectively led by a knowledgeable chair with a strong commitment to improvement. The panel's has a central list, a requirement from the last report. This includes a care experienced member, current foster carers from other agencies, professionals working for the police, health and education and an independent social worker. The panel chair reports a significant improvement in the quality of assessments brought to panel since the appointment of the Registered Manager, a view shared by the agency decision maker, a senior manager within NFA. Panel recommendations are well considered and the minutes reflect the discussion that informed the recommendations.

The dedicated referrals officer, a registered social worker, uses the information from the foster carers' assessment, distilled to a matching pro-forma to inform the matching process in considering suitable foster carers in light of the request for a placement received. The matching document, frequently the local authorities' own form, evidences the strengths and areas where the foster carers will need additional support to meet the shortfalls in matching, thus meeting a recommendation of the last inspection. This detailed response ensures that resources are available from the start of the placement. Supervising social workers actively undertake an ongoing assessment of foster carers and a thorough approach to their annual review ensures that only those who remain suitable are retained. This has led to some turnover in the past year but household numbers have been largely maintained by recruitment.

Foster carers have a good understanding of delegated authority, which is supported by written confirmation of the arrangements. The delegated areas of responsibility that foster carers are given usually reflect the length of placement. Children and young people's looked after reviews are timely and responsive to emerging needs.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

Foster carers have a good understanding of age-appropriate risks. They work with children and young people to help them to learn how to keep themselves safe. Children know how to complain and say they would if they had anything to complain about. They feel listened to and are confident that their worries are heard. The agency equips carers to engage young people in discussion about risk, for example internet safety, and give them strategies to manage areas of risk.

Children and young people's placement plans and risk assessments have been reviewed. In the light of this a new format, called Signs of Safety, this has been introduced. Where this has been completed it provides a good picture of the risks and the actions to be implemented to reduce these. The existing placement plans

and risk assessment records are not routinely updated to reflect changes in practice in response to changes in identified risks or circumstances.

There are infrequent incidents of young people going missing. Where this does occur it is robustly monitored and appropriate action taken. Foster carers and supervising social workers have a good awareness of the risks of child sexual exploitation. Training on this is delivered to all those who work with the agency, including staff, carers and panel members. Young people are made aware of the potential risks that they expose themselves to.

The agency promotes safe care. Foster carers have a good understanding of child protection. It is woven through all aspects of their interactions with the agency and at all stages. Safeguarding is a core facet of the skills to foster course, has separate training courses and is referred to in other training events and is a key feature in supervision. Foster carers know what to do in the event of a disclosure or concern and understand their role in protecting the children that they foster. They also understand how past experiences impact on children's behaviour, seeing this behaviour as communication and responding appropriately. A small minority of foster carers have not received unannounced visits as required. Prior to this inspection the management had identified that systems for tracking these are insufficiently robust. They have begun to implement a new system for undertaking these unannounced visits with a view to ensuring that they are made at least annually.

The recruitment of staff and panel members, the subject of a requirement in the last report is now robust and includes ensuring the suitability of staff not eligible for the full disclosure and barring service check. The agency has taken action in light of the most recent guidance in this area.

The registered manager actively and successfully promotes an open and caring culture throughout the agency. The emphasis is on improving practice and outcomes for children and young people so the views of 'critical friends' are welcomed. In this atmosphere transparency is a watchword at all levels, supporting all those working for the agency to be pro-active in sharing any concerns.

Any allegations are referred promptly and handled well by the agency. Issues passed to the agency to investigate have not in all cases been sufficiently robust, with limited triangulation in one instance. This case is being re-investigated.

There are sound systems for the regular review of safeguarding practice, both at a local and national level. Outcomes from these reviews are used to inform and develop practice.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

The suitably qualified and experienced registered manager has been in post for a year. In this time she has been recognised by the head of the NFA for her

outstanding leadership and commitment. She has developed highly effective relationships with placing local authorities. They report effective partnership working and commissioning officers are positive about the role of the agency. This underpins good progress and outcomes for young people.

Leaders and managers are very knowledgeable about the day-to-day progress of children and young people. They have a good sense of the activities that children and young people are engaged in and how they influence their care, both in daily living and in the longer term. The formal systems for recording this are not fully embedded in the practice of supervising social workers or supported by the computer systems in place. The NFA are in the middle of a piece of work looking at recording systems and are considering which best meets the needs of the organisation as a whole.

The management team are committed to and effectively promote a culture of continual learning. There are regular reviews of the service which seek information from children, foster carers and other stakeholders. The evaluation of these reviews is used to drive improvements in the service and in turn outcomes for children and young people. This also includes monitoring the matters required by regulations, as stipulated in the last report. One young person reflected that her input and views on the new children and young people's guides had also influenced changes to the foster carers' review consultation papers for children and young people. Recently a young person participated in the recruitment of a team manager in the fostering team. The panel use videos from children looked after to ask questions of prospective foster carers. The annual development plan is comprehensive and identifies strategies for growth and development of the agency.

The Statement of Purpose accurately describes the aims and ethos of the agency and is reflected in practice. Children's guides, recently revised in the light of consultation with young people, provide information attractively presented and easily accessible. Foster carers know about the Foster Carer's Charter and feel the agency delivers on this, without direct reference to it. Complaints are generally responded to appropriately with learning identified and action points implemented. In one case further work is being done by the agency to provide a fuller response to the points raised by the complainant.

Strategies for recruitment of foster carers are proving successful. This is seen in the recruitment of 14 new carers during the past year, with nine assessments in process. The work of foster carers and the agency to underpin placements to achieve stability is successful. A therapist has contracted with the agency to focus on attachment work with foster carers, where a child has an identified need; this helps them move forward. A clear focus is on how to create good relationships between foster carers and children and young people. The therapist's experience of the agency is that it is progressive in its thinking, receptive and open to suggestions. Support workers are also used to good effect, providing strong role models to further promote positive identity and self-esteem.

The management of the agency have developed a highly motivated, enthusiastic and energetic group of staff, ambitious for the children and young people cared for by their foster carers. Those employed in the past few months have quickly become part

of a cohesive and consistent team. All those employed and contracted by the agency are experienced, hold the qualifications required for their role and are well supervised so that they reflect on their role in the agency. Being part of a national body provides additional resources that the service uses to good effect, for example quality assurance, which provides an additional level of scrutiny. Staff training is of a good standard and equips them to do their role effectively. Staff appraisals are seen as positive and engage staff in setting targets for themselves and well as reflecting on achievements. Staff appraisals are up to date and 360 degree appraisals are to be introduced, with consideration being given as to how foster carers and children and young people could contribute.

Statutory notifications have been made as required, with action plans implemented where this is necessary. All the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have been met.

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.