

Rural Foster Care Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Romana Young
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Rural Foster Care is an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA), which was registered in October 2002. The agency provides a range of fostering services such as time-limited or short-term care, long-term or permanent care, emergency care, specialist or intensive fostering and parent and baby care. At 31 March 2007, there were 56 fostering households approved with this service providing care to 56 children and young people. The agency is based at the company headquarters in Teignmouth, Devon but also has two sub-offices in North Petherton, Somerset and Ringwood, Southampton.

Summary

This statutory inspection visit was undertaken as an announced key inspection. All key National Minimum Standards were inspected and judged as met. There has been a company restructure with significant changes to the senior management team since the last inspection visit. However, there has been steady leadership of the service during this time of change. The service was found to be continuing to operate at a good standard overall. Two recommendations regarding the fostering panel and one recommendation in relation to the safeguarding procedure have been made at this inspection visit. It is recommended that the membership and operation of the fostering panel are reviewed to ensure that required roles are filled and that panel meetings operate efficiently in a suitable venue. It is also recommended that the policy and procedure for safeguarding children are amended to ensure that a prompt referral of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed with the fostering service is made to the area authority.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service provider has taken effective action to address the seven statutory requirements that were made in the last inspection report. The service provider was asked to ensure that foster carers are given sufficient and up-to-date written information on a child or young person placed with them and that placement agreements and foster carer agreements are in place, so that foster carers can provide a child or young person with appropriate care according to their needs. Foster carers reported that, generally, they receive satisfactory or good information about a child or young person prior to placement and that agency staff do all they can to ensure that foster carers are provided with the information they need to look after the child or young person properly and safely. The service provider has introduced an electronic recording system called 'Foster Track', which has greatly improved management monitoring capability and systems. The service provider was also asked to put measures into place to ensure that it has obtained all the required information about a person before they are allowed to start working for the service. Inspection of staff files and discussions with staff confirmed that current recruitment practice and procedures meet regulatory requirements. The service provider has also made progress with its action plan relating to the 10 good practice recommendations made in the last inspection report. The service provider is currently reviewing and updating all policies, procedures, recording processes and information materials, following the company restructure. Recording systems are being revised to match the five Every Child Matters outcome headings, so that children and young people's progress in these areas can be more effectively recorded

and monitored. The 'Foster Track' programme is an effective management monitoring tool for ensuring that all required documentation is in place and tracking how the service is operating. The service provider is adopting the more commonly used 'Form F' reporting format for the assessment of prospective foster carers to improve consistency in this process. The system for undertaking health and safety checks on foster homes is being improved and strengthened. A health and safety specialist is being appointed to undertake these checks and produce a report with agreed timescales for action, which will then be followed up. Supervising social workers are currently working with foster carers to produce safe care plans.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency has good measures in place to ensure that children and young people placed are receiving health care, advice and guidance, which meets their individual needs. All children and young people placed with the service are registered with primary health care services such as a General Practitioner (G.P.), dentist or optician. Children and young people are provided with specialist therapeutic support to promote and assist their emotional and psychological development and wellbeing, if there is an assessed need for this. Foster carers report that they are being provided with information about children and young people's health needs so that they can provide them with safe and suitable care. Placing social workers report that both the agency and its foster carers are very good at ensuring that children and young people placed with the service receive good care and support to ensure their healthy physical, emotional and social development. Children and young people report that they are being encouraged and supported to eat healthily and have a health lifestyle. Foster carers are provided with training in administering first aid and specific health needs so that they have the skills and knowledge needed to provide suitable care and support to children and young people, which will meet their individual needs and safeguard and promote their good health and wellbeing. The agency is currently reviewing all its policies and procedures, which includes how the written health record, which is given to a foster carer when a child is placed, is maintained.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There are generally good systems in operation to ensure that foster homes are safe and suitable and that children and young people are being cared for appropriately, protected from harm and their welfare promoted. There is a strong focus within the service on making the right match for a child with foster carers who have the capability and skills to meet the child's needs. Foster carers report that the service is good at ensuring they can meet the needs of children and young people placed with them. Children and young people feel well cared for in their foster homes and know who to speak to if they are not happy or have a personal problem. Placing social workers feel that both the service and foster carers have a good, balanced focus on safeguarding children and young people and protecting them from harm. Foster carers are provided with guidance and training on safe caring and understanding and managing behaviour so that they have the skills and knowledge to look after children and young people safely in accordance with their particular needs. Foster carers confirmed that they are able to contact agency staff to obtain advice, guidance and support, by telephone, at any time. Foster carers are provided with written advice and guidance, which is currently being revised and updated and consolidated into a new foster carer handbook. Satisfactory recruitment and vetting procedures are used to ensure that people who work in, or for, the fostering service are suitable

to work with children and young people. There are good processes in place for ensuring that appropriate assessments of prospective foster carers are being undertaken. The fostering panel ensures that good quality decisions are made about the approval of foster carers so that children and young people placed with the service receive good quality care, which meets their needs. Recent organisational and managerial changes mean that some alterations to the membership of the fostering panel are now needed. A recommendation has been made that the fostering service provider reviews the membership of the fostering panel to ensure that it meets the regulatory requirements. A further recommendation has been made for the fostering service provider to review how and where panel meetings are held to ensure that panel business runs to time and that the venue includes a private waiting area for applicants attending the panel.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service gives a high priority to ensuring that the educational needs of children and young people are being well met and that children and young people are being encouraged and supported to reach their full potential. The service employs an educational liaison officer who ensures that children and young people are being given the support they need to progress educationally. Foster carers are well focussed on encouraging and supporting children and young people in their care to participate fully at school and reach their academic potential. Children and young people feel that they are receiving the right help so that they can be successful in their education. Training for foster carers on valuing diversity and promoting equality is included in the mandatory pre-approval training course, to raise awareness, promote good practice and build on foster carers' knowledge and skills in these areas. Placing social workers reported that foster carers are committed to ensuring that children and young people are accessing opportunities to develop and pursue their talents, interests and hobbies. Foster carers said that the service performs well in addressing issues of equality and diversity.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children and young people are encouraged and supported to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships as set out in the care plan and foster placement agreement. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in promoting and supporting contact arrangements. The service makes good efforts to ensure that children and young people are involved in decisions about their day-to-day lives and are encouraged and supported to participate in care planning reviews. Children and young people reported that their foster carers listen to them and take notice of their opinions. They also said that they knew what to do if they wanted to make a complaint. Placing social workers who responded the questionnaire survey feel that the agency and foster carers are good at communicating with them and consulting them about issues that are likely to affect the child or young person's daily life. They confirmed that the service provides them with regular reports on the child or young person's progress and needs.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers are provided with advice and guidance to assist them in helping young people prepare for independent living. Foster carers reported that the service is good at enabling them to provide an environment for a child to prosper. Children and young people reported that their foster carers encourage them to think and talk about plans for their future. Foster carers are

supported to care for children and young people placed with them through the payment of a specified allowance and agreed expenses. Payments are made at the agreed time and allowances are reviewed annually. The service is reviewing the transport cost element in the allowance and is consulting with foster carers about this.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Following the recent company restructure, the service provider is currently undertaking a review and update of all policies, procedures and agency information, including the Statement of Purpose and children's guide. The safeguarding children policy and procedure have recently been revised. However, a further amendment is still needed to ensure that they fully meet regulatory requirements. A recommendation has been made. The management team has provided steady leadership through this period of change, which has allowed the service to continue to operate at a good level overall. The service provides a child-focussed service to children and young people. Staff and foster carers are well-focussed on achieving good outcomes for children and young people and ensuring that the needs of the children and young people in their care are being met. Staff hold suitable qualifications for their role. Foster carers are supported to undertake vocational training such as National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 in Children's Care, Learning and Development. Staff and foster carers reported that they felt they are given good support for their roles through access to regular supervision and relevant training courses. They feel that managers are accessible, listen to what they have to say about the operation of the service and the standard of care being provided to children and young people and take effective action when necessary. Case records are now well maintained. The 'Foster Track' computer system the agency is now using is an efficient tool for monitoring how the service is operating. The new company structure provides clearer lines of accountability and more focussed management scrutiny of the quality of the service being provided.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- ensure that the membership of the fostering panel, which should be a maximum of 10 persons, includes one of the directors of the organisation or the responsible individual and two social workers employed by the fostering service and that at least one of these two social workers is able to attend each panel session (NMS 30)
- review how and where fostering panels are held to ensure that the time-keeping of panel meetings is efficient and that there is a private waiting area available for applicants who are attending panel (NMS 30).

- ensure that the safeguarding children policy and procedure are amended to provide for the prompt referral of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed with the fostering service to the area authority, that is, the authority in which the child is residing, in addition to the authority responsible for the care of the child (NMS 25).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.