

The Homefinding & Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC036653
Inspection date	16/11/2015
Inspector	Lucy Chapman
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	67 College Road, MAIDSTONE, Kent, ME15 6SX
------------------------	--

Telephone number	01622 765646
Email	duty@homefindingandfostering.co.uk
Registered person	Kent Homefinding and Fostering Ltd
Registered manager	Mr Satwinder Sandhu

Responsible individual	Mr Terry Casey
Date of last inspection	25/01/2013

© Crown copyright 2015

Website: www.gov.uk/ofsted

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Homefinding and Fostering Agency is privately owned. The agency currently supports 60 fostering households, providing placements for 94 children and young people. The service seeks to provide both short and long-term foster placements for children and young people of all ages throughout the south east of England, with a focus on Kent and London. It offers a small number of parent and child placements. The agency ensures that sibling groups are placed together whenever possible.

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 agency supports children and young people to live and thrive in stable placements. 60% of children and young people are in long-term placements, 25% with the same carer for over five years. Placement disruptions are below national average. Well-matched stable placements enable children and young people to build positive futures.

Foster carers receive excellent support; foster care retention rates are high. A foster carer says 'it's wonderful fostering here, I love it, the support I have is really good'. The agency places emphasis on ensuring that foster carers are well supported and looked after, allowing them to provide high quality carer to children and young people.

Placing authorities speak highly of the agency and their support of children and young people. One local authority social worker says 'the agency are really really

helpful, communication is good and they are very responsive to meet children's needs. Children do really well there and make good progress.'

Meticulous recruitment means that the agency approves high-calibre foster carers. Robust panel processes go together with child-centred decision-making and a strong commitment to safeguarding; this protects children and young people.

There are shortfalls: Monitoring practice within the agency lacks rigour. Recording lacks detail and a lack of management oversight means that there is an absence of quality assurance. Children and young people's safe care plans do not receive consistent monitoring, review and updating as children and young people's needs change. Staff and panel annual appraisals are overdue, missing opportunities to review and develop staff practice. There are no organisational policies for child sexual exploitation (CSE) and radicalisation. Carers have not received training in these areas although training is now booked. Children and young people go missing infrequently, when they do, the provision of return home interviews is inconsistent; the agency does not pursue the placing authority to ensure that they undertake this duty. Professional supervision arrangements for the Registered Manager are insufficient; his supervision is not by a suitably qualified individual.

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 with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
ensure the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times, in particular that children's risk assessments address identified risks and are monitored, reviewed and evaluated (Regulation 11(a))	31 January 2016
ensure the fostering service provider prepares and implements a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, particularly that a CSE and radicalisation policy are established and that the online safety policy is updated (Regulation 12(1)(a))	31 January 2016
ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal, in particular that staff and panel members receive annual appraisal (Regulation 21(4)(a))	31 January 2016
ensure the registered person maintains a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering	31 January 2016

agency (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b))	
ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table (Regulation 36(1))	31 January 2016

Recommendations

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

ensure support and training is made available to foster carers and staff to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for, in particular CSE and radicalisation training (NMS 20.8)

ensure that if a child is absent from the fostering home and their whereabouts are not known (i.e. the child is missing), the fostering service's procedures are compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located, in particular that return home interviews are undertaken (NMS 5.6)

ensure suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of the agency's Registered Manager (NMS 24.3)

ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and to take action when needed, in particular that staff receive a full copy of supervision records and that supervising social worker recording is monitored to quality assure record keeping (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Overwhelmingly, children and young people make good progress and achieve good outcomes in this agency. Well matched placements with thoughtful transition planning enables children and young people to settle in new placements. An Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) says about the young person, 'she is doing really well, I was impressed with the carer and how they helped her to settle into their family. The agency are a significant contributing factor to the progress she has made'.

Foster carers support children and young people to engage in new and enriching experiences, allowing them to develop confidence and self-esteem. One child has received support to engage with Kung-Fu classes, his carer says 'his confidence is growing so much, he went to a ceremony to get his Kung- Fu award, he feels so much better about himself. He will try new things now, before he wouldn't because he thought he couldn't do it'.

A holistic independence programme equips young people with the skills they need for independent living. Foster carers lead training, with supervising social worker oversight. The agency maintains no records of independence skill training; this misses opportunities to monitor and support young people's progress.

Children and young people say that they feel included and valued in their foster families. Some foster carers go on to adopt the children and young people in their care. Care leavers stay with their foster families for as long as they wish to; the agency supports staying put arrangements.

Excellent agency support for contact means that, wherever possible, children and young people have regular contact with their family. The agency provide in-house transportation to support contact and contact supervision facilities. Parents are positive about contact arrangements and local authority social workers commend agency support of contact.

All children and young people are in school, college or apprenticeships. Agency transportation enables children and young people placed out of area to attend their existing school, providing educational and friendship stability. Foster carers demonstrate commitment and support of children and young people's educational progress. One foster carer is learning primary maths techniques to support a child's learning; another has made links with local business, achieving an apprenticeship scheme for a young person.

Children and young people take pride in the educational progress that they make, one child says 'I have made progress since I've lived here, I know all my tables, we sing them in the car on the way to school. I'm much better at school, I do more work, I do my homework now, my carer helps me'. The agency places emphasis on education progress and equips carers to support the children and young people in

their care; as a result, they make excellent progress.

Foster carers proactively support children and young people's health. Health training for carers covers physical and emotional wellbeing as well as dietary health. Young people who smoke receive advice and are encouraged to reduce and stop smoking. Those who misuse alcohol or drugs obtain services and support to promote cessation. The agency has effective links with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), enabling children and young people to receive therapeutic assessment and support. The agency works in partnership with specialist health services to ensure that children and young people receive suitable health services and that foster carers receive the advice that they need to provide effective care.

Agency staff with lifestory training are available to support children and young people to make sense of their past and to recognise their present and future. Children and young people develop a positive identity and their challenging behaviour diminishes. A local authority Social Worker says 'previously there was lots of aggression, we have seen a real change in him, he is calmer, happier and doing really well at school.'

Children and young people are encouraged to express their wishes and feelings and to participate in decision-making. They attend and contribute to their care plan review meetings; their views influence care. The agency has links with advocacy services and supports children and young people to seek advocacy as required.

The agency is increasingly offering opportunities for children and young people. They enjoy attending daytrips, seasonal parties and craft workshops. Recent links with a restaurant chain provide new opportunities for young people to learn catering skills. The agency values children and young people's feedback and provides online opportunities for them to share their views and ideas. Presently, their impact on agency decision making is limited; this is an ongoing area of development.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has high levels of foster carer retention; foster carers feel well supported and valued by the agency. One foster carer says 'I think they're brilliant, they're supportive to us as well as the children. Any day, any time, there's always someone there'. Steady foster carer recruitment ensures that sufficient foster carers are available to provide children and young people with suitable placements. Recruitment is inclusive with advertising attracting applicants from diverse backgrounds, meeting children and young people's diverse needs.

Fostering applicants describe high quality training that equips them for the fostering role. A thorough assessment process means that only those carers with the capacity to meet children and young people's needs progress to panel. The agency fostering

panel members bring diversity of background and experience. Panel discussion provides robust exploration of issues and reasoned decision-making. The agency decision maker has up to date training to ensure best practice in her role. Panel processes demonstrate child centred decision-making and a strong commitment to safeguarding; this protects children and young people.

New carers receive exceptional support to complete their training, support, development standards (TSDS) within timescale. Fortnightly group workshops are supplemented by individual support as required. Carers say that they value the learning and support that this group offers; some continue to attend after completing their TSDS, acting as mentors to newer carers.

Ongoing training for foster carers equips them to meet children and young people's needs. One carer says 'I love the training, the courses I've done have been really good, they are tailored to what we need'. The agency supports training; crèche facilities enable training attendance where carers have young children placed. Where carers lack a proactive approach to training the agency respond robustly; newly introduced financial penalties for non-attendance at booked training has improved training take-up.

Regular supervision of foster carers enhances foster carer practice. One foster carer says 'my supervising social workers has helped me and my young person enormously, she will sometimes say, "have you thought of doing it this way?" When it's difficult the support gets us through.' Ongoing effective support enables carers to stick with placements through challenging periods; placement stability is high.

Supervising social workers build relationships with both fostered and birth children. One birth child says that their supervising social worker helped herself and a fostered child to work through a disagreement. She says 'we have our ups and downs but we get over them, our supervising social worker has helped us'. Agency support is available for all members of the fostering family; this supports placement stability.

Foster carers say that they feel listened to; a new foster carer forum enhances the voice of foster carers. Their views influence agency decision-making, recent changes to the training programme to provide more practical, scenario-based training, are in response to foster carer feedback.

The agency was established by foster carers and organisational culture places emphasis on making sure that foster carers are well supported and looked after, enabling them to provide high quality care to children and young people. A new counselling service for carers provides an additional source of support that carer's value.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Foster carers have a good understanding of safeguarding. All carers undertake mandatory safeguarding training and demonstrate a good working knowledge to keep children and young people safe. Carers effectively report safeguarding concerns in line with agency safeguarding procedures, this results in appropriate action to protect children and young people.

Mandatory e-safety training means that carers have a comprehensive understanding of the risks of online use, and action they need to take to minimise risks. One carer says 'I was aware of online dangers before but the course gave me more information. I make sure that safe use procedures are in place. I've spoken to my birth and fostered child, using scenarios to learn about keeping safe'. Children and young people understand online dangers and speak to their carers about any concerns. A proactive approach to online safety by the agency and foster carers ensures that children and young people know how to keep safe online; ongoing open communication enables children and young people to share their concerns and receive help.

. Supervising social workers are proactive in undertaking their own research and learning in this area, and share this with carers. Where children and young people in placement have a known risk of CSE, specialist training is sought which foster carers attend alongside their supervising social worker, this forms the basis of ongoing work to keep children and young people safe.

Foster carers produce safe care plans with supervising social worker oversight. Some safe care plans lack detail and do not receive regular monitoring and updating to reflect children and young people's progress and changing needs. Where there are safeguarding concerns swift action by foster carers and supervising social workers ensures effective safety planning, in partnership with placing authorities and specialist agencies. Agency recording does not reflect the significant work undertaken to keep children and young people safe.

Improved staff recruitment processes ensure safe recruitment; this protects children and young people. A strong commitment to child-centred decision-making and safeguarding is evident throughout the agency. Staff and carers know and understand the whistleblowing policy and demonstrate a commitment to using this if they became aware of organisational wrongdoing; there have been no whistleblowing concerns. Unannounced visits to foster carers are undertaken at least annually, enhancing the safety of children and young people within their foster families.

Incidents of children and young people missing are infrequent. Practical agency support, including in-house transportation to school and contact enhances their safety. Where they are missing effective safeguarding action protects them,

however, return home interviews are not consistently undertaken. The agency does not effectively pursue the placing authority to undertake this duty and does not provide this service where the local authority are unable. This fails to explore the reasons for children and young people's missing behaviour and neglects to consider their voice in safe care planning.

The agency does not have established links with the area local safeguarding children board; this overlooks the safeguarding advice, training and information that this service provides.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

A newly registered manager with 11 years of management experience leads this agency. He is a qualified social worker and is currently completing a Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA). He has worked in fostering and adoption throughout his career; this is his first position as registered manager.

The agency has excellent working relationships with placing authorities; they speak highly of the agency. One local authority commissioner says 'the agency are excellent in the way they work with children. They are always willing to step in and help us out and are great for sibling groups. The agency do really well, we like working with them, they do a good job'.

An online statement of purpose provides up to date information about the service and includes clear complaints procedures. High-quality children's guides provide children and young people with age appropriate information, including the agency complaints procedure and helplines. Complaints are infrequent; where made, they are actioned effectively by the Registered Manager.

Long-term consistent staffing means that supervising social workers know foster carers and their birth and foster children and young people extremely well. Supervising social workers work well as a team; an effective verbal information sharing culture has evolved with reduced reliance upon thorough written records. Limited management oversight of agency recording fails to address recording issues; information is not easily accessible and recording is not of the expected standard.

The previous inspection highlighted poor monitoring; ineffective action to address this means that management monitoring is a continued shortfall. Required regulatory monitoring is not to timescale and is not consistently submitted to Ofsted. It is unclear how monitoring information is utilised to promote improvements in the service.

There are unclear systems for reporting notifiable events, resulting in reporting

errors. The Registered Manager has not submitted all notifiable events to Ofsted. One allegation, although actioned effectively, had overdue reporting to the local authority designated officer, meaning that there was delay in obtaining specialist-safeguarding advice.

Feedback from all sources evidences that children and young people make good progress in their placements. Current agency monitoring does not capture and record their progress, this risks missing opportunities to update children and young people's care plans where they fail to make progress or their progress stagnates. The Registered Manager is yet to instigate proposed new systems to monitor children and young people's progress.

Staff supervision has a strong focus upon foster carers and the wellbeing of children and young people placed. Although regularly supervised, staff do not receive effective records of supervision. Recording of the practice issues staff raise is limited; this does not monitor or support their ongoing development.

Supervision arrangements for the Registered Manager are ineffective. The Registered Individual is able to provide business based supervision; however, there is no suitably qualified individual available to provide supervision of practice issues.

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.