

West Midlands Family Placement

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency is run by a large children's charity. It was founded in March 2008 following the merger of three long-standing and well-established projects operated by the same organisation. It provides long-term, short-term and emergency family-based placements for children aged between 0 and 18 years, including sibling groups, children with or without learning and/or physical disabilities.

The agency is currently looking after 51 children and young people and has 39 fostering households providing full-time care. In addition, 15 fostering households provide short break, respite care to the agency's foster carers.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

The fostering agency is effective and well managed. Managers and staff are committed to fostering and have a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the agency through rigorous monitoring. Children and young people are well matched in stable placements. There are very low instances of unplanned endings of placements. This is due to good matching and the high quality support which is provided to sustain the placements. Children and young people report that they are happy and secure in their placements and are positive about the care they receive.

Equality and diversity are given a high priority within the agency. Children and young people, foster carers and staff's diverse needs are identified and met well.

Children are making good progress in all aspects of their development and especially with regard to their health and education. This is particularly significant in that a high proportion of the children and young people placed with the service are disabled, compared with comparative independent fostering agencies.

Comprehensive assessments of foster carers' skills are conducted and robust risk

assessments are carried out. These ensure children and young people are kept safe and experience positive outcomes.

Foster carers are well trained and receive good quality supervision and support. They work as a team with staff and other professionals and feel highly valued. Young people also are highly valued by their carers and by the agency. They are actively encouraged to contribute to their care and to the delivery of service. Foster carers, staff and managers actively promote a family-friendly atmosphere within the agency.

As a result of this visit three recommendations have been made relating to guidance, training and reviews for foster carers.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure foster carers receive accurate advice and guidance to promote children's health needs (NMS 6.1)
- ensure the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel (NMS 14.9)
- ensure all foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained, and for new foster carers these have been attained within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children and young people receive a high level of individualised care that meets their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Children with complex health and education requirements are having their needs met by carers who are well trained and informed. Bespoke training and packages of care are developed to ensure children and young people receive care specific to their requirements to ensure the best possible outcomes.

Their needs in relation to their ability, ethnicity and identity are also being well met. Children and young people are appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet these needs. Where there are gaps in relation to ethnicity, these are being well met by their foster carers, who liaise with local community groups to support children's religious beliefs. This ensures children and young people have a good knowledge and understanding of their religion and culture.

Children and young people are well supported and enabled to share their views,

wishes and feelings irrespective of how they communicate. One placing social worker commented: 'Carers have a good understanding of the child's needs, age and stage of learning, and support his communication by visual and signing techniques.'

Young people actively participate in the day-to-day decisions involving them and in decisions that influence their lives. For example, one young person is fully involved in his care planning and chairs his own reviews. Young people are also encouraged to contribute to the running of the fostering service by attending regular participation events where their views are gained by staff and managers. For instance, young people have recently become involved in redesigning the children's guide.

Children and young people are happy in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. They make good progress to develop a positive self-view, and make and sustain strong attachments with their carers. Young people have commented that, 'the good things about my foster family are being happy', and, 'they're kind and fun, but the most important thing is that if we are worried about something we can talk to them.'

Children and young people have a good understanding of their background and identity through positive contact with family and friends. They very rarely experience unplanned endings to their placements. Over the last 12 months there has been only one occasion where a placement has ended without the appropriate planning.

Children and young people have a clear understanding of health risks and very rarely engage in risk-taking behaviours or activities such as smoking and drug or alcohol use. They regularly attend school and they are making good progress in their educational achievement. Young people are able to access individual support to help them succeed in education, such as extra maths tuition.

Children and young people participate in a wide range of community and leisure activities, such as the special Olympics, gymnastics, drama clubs and youth clubs. Some young people travel all over the country with their foster carers, attending competitions in sporting events. This develops self-esteem and confidence, supporting them in all areas of their development.

Young people are acquiring the practical and life skills needed to successfully attain independence. Foster carers, supported by the service, advocate strongly on behalf of the young people living with them to help get the services needed to ensure a smooth transition into adulthood.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

The fostering agency recruits a diverse range of carers who meet the needs of the children and young people placed. Clear recruitment plans target areas where recruitment needs are identified.

The assessments of foster carers are clear, comprehensive and evaluative. They focus strongly on the needs of children and young people. The preparation and training of prospective foster carers enables them to have a good understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering task.

The fostering panel makes timely and child-centred recommendations. It is robust in its scrutiny of foster carer assessments and reviews. A high level of quality assurance function has been developed which ensures the quality of assessments are improved and maintained. All assessments, the foster carers' first review, and where changes to approval are required, are considered by the panel. Currently, however, only the reviews considered by panel and those which recommend change of approval are sent to the agency decision maker for a decision regarding foster carers' approval.

Good matching is taking place. A system of matching has been developed which ensures considered thinking of children and young people's needs to carers' skills is taking place. Children and young people's needs are understood, assessed and shared with foster carers to ensure secure and stable placements are made and sustained.

Foster carers are well trained to meet the needs of the children and young people they care for. Comprehensive induction, mandatory and developmental training is offered to foster carers. Where complex health needs require specialist care, such as tube feeding, foster carers are given specific training which is individualised to each child and young person prior to placement. This ensures the complex health needs of children are fully met. One placing social worker commented that: 'The family have provided a high level of both physical and emotional care to the child.' Another stated: 'Carers are excellent at ensuring the child's health needs are met and promoted.' Guidance to foster carers, however, regarding the administration of household medication has not been updated in line with current guidelines and practice.

Foster carers actively seek ongoing development and further training to increase their skills and knowledge. Foster carers receive regular advice with regards to good practice through the agency's newsletter and through regular forums which allow carers to update their skills and knowledge.

The agency gives high priority to ensuring carers achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council training standards in foster care. A very small minority, however, have not managed to complete these within timescales. Ways of helping carers who are struggling to reach these skills are considered. For example, carers are supported through workshops, individual sessions with support workers and through linking carers with a mentor foster carer.

Foster carers have a good working relationship with the fostering agency and work as part of a team, sharing responsibility with other key professionals. They are actively involved in planning, and their views are highly regarded by the agency. The agency is very strong in encouraging participation with foster carers and with young people. Participation events are regularly organised to celebrate foster carers' and

young people's achievements and to gain their views on the running of the agency. Foster carers feel they are treated as professionals with their views considered by supervising social workers.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people feel safe living with their foster families because foster carers support them to feel safe from bullying and abuse. Staff and foster carers receive regular training in safeguarding, which ensures they are aware of the procedures they need to take to keep children and young people safe. Recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of carers all have a strong focus on safeguarding.

Children and young people know how to complain. The children's guide details how they can make a complaint and who to speak to if they have any concerns. There have been no complaints from children or young people over the last 12 months.

Recruitment and vetting of staff are thorough and help ensure the safety of children and young people. Supervising social workers complete unannounced visits to foster carers' homes, and health and safety pre-approval risk assessments, which are updated annually.

Foster carers complete a generic safe caring policy which is revised on the placement of a child or young person. Detailed risk assessments are also completed covering all areas of risk in respect of each child and young person placed. These are reviewed annually and completed in full every three years. They help identify the impact of any concerns and behaviours and minimise their risk. These procedures help ensure the welfare and safety of children and young people remain the central focus of the agency.

The agency is a safe environment for staff and carers to work in. There is an open staff culture within the agency which encourages whistle blowing. Procedures are in place to ensure allegations are handled carefully and promptly. There have been no referrals to the Independent Safeguarding Authority or child protection enquiries in the last 12 months. Children and young people do not go missing from their foster homes and there have been no reported instances of children and young people going missing in the last 12 months.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

Since the last inspection the agency has merged with two other long-standing and well-established services run by the same organisation. The Registered Manager and responsible individual have both been employed with the agency since the merger and are highly experienced and motivated. There were no actions or

recommendations made at the last inspection.

Staff are well supported. There is a good level of supervision which is of a high quality. Although there has been considerable change over recent years involving the structure of management and staff, the agency is now settled. Staff and carers feel supported and valued and highly praise the support they receive from management. This demonstrates the agency has a capacity for continuing improvement.

Staff are highly experienced and are kept up to date with relevant training and good practice. However, the agency is unable to support them in obtaining post qualification awards, which is a source of frustration for staff. This has been recognised by managers who are attempting to resolve this issue.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose and children's guides which are produced in pictorial format. They are clear and accessible to all so everyone is clear about the aims and objectives of the agency.

The agency is well managed. There is a high level of monitoring throughout to ensure good delivery and quality of care. This monitoring is evaluative and is used to actively drive continuous improvements in outcomes for children and young people and service provision.

Young people actively influence and contribute to the development of the agency. Young people and their foster carers attend regular participation days and work together as a team to contribute towards service delivery. Young people have helped in writing the consultation forms for foster carer reviews and the children's guide. Foster carers contribute and help with training. An event was held for older sons and daughters and fostered children at the suggestion of foster carers. Foster carers have also been consulted about the implementation of a new recording system.

The agency has established effective and positive working relationships with other professionals. One local authority commissioner felt that the agency has, 'developed a better working relationship and understanding of our requirements'. One placing social worker commented: 'We meet with the supervising social worker at the child's review and we have also arranged joint visits to discuss specific issues.' Another stated: 'The fostering service provides me with a copy of their supervision of the carers which is based on good outcomes for children.'

The agency has systems to ensure all events are referred to the appropriate agencies. Complaints are dealt with robustly and fairly. The agency has had only one complaint in the last 12 months.

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 independent fostering agencies.