

Fosterplus

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Robert Smith
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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

Fosterplus is an independent fostering agency based in Bedfordshire. The agency has number of branches in the south east of England and also runs a fostering service in Scotland. The agency provides emergency, short and long-term foster placements for children of all ages and with a range of care needs. The registered branch of the agency in Thame, Oxfordshire is the subject of this inspection. The Thame branch employs a manager, two social work staff and an administrator. The work of the branch is supported by a range of central and shared resources in the agency. The branch currently supports 15 carer households, offering a maximum of 35 placements for children. Carers are widely distributed across the geographical area covered by the branch and placements are made primarily by nearby local authorities. The branch is located in office premises on an industrial estate near to the centre of the town of Thame, in Oxfordshire.

Summary

The Thame branch of Fosterplus provides a consistently high standard of practice in all key outcome areas for children. Good support is offered to carers to make sure children's health care needs are met and healthy styles are promoted. Excellent attention is paid to all aspects of child protection and safe caring to ensure children are offered stable, safe and well matched placements that meet their needs consistently. Good attention is paid to meeting diversity needs arising from children's differing backgrounds and care needs. Educational stability and progress is vigorously supported by the branch and its carers to ensure children achieve their educational potential. Consistent support is offered to contact arrangements to help ensure children, wherever feasible, maintain links with their family and home communities. Good arrangements are in place to help ensure children's views are heard and respected. The local service is very well managed to ensure the needs of staff, carers and placed children are met consistently and that placements are well supported, whilst being subject to appropriate levels of monitoring to ensure their suitability. The agency has robust systems in place to monitor branch practice and service quality. No significant shortfalls have been identified in this inspection and only minor recommendations have been made in relation to more focused recording of concerns arising about carer practice and development of the fostering panel's formal assessment of service quality.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The agency and branch have taken appropriate steps to address requirements and recommendations set at the last inspection conducted by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). To address the requirement relating to management qualifications for the registered manager the manager is now undertaking a relevant qualification course. A number of recommendations were made to do with the scope and consistency of carer training programmes. These have been fully addressed by the agency with expansion of training, for example in diversity issues, and clearer indication of mandatory training expectations in revised foster carer agreements. Training for panel members has also been provided as recommended. The agency continues to work hard to obtain relevant information from placing authorities, as recommended, and carers are now given formal opportunities to feed back their experience of panel attendance. The agency continues to try to recruit carers from black and minority ethnic

communities as recommended. Further improvements have been made in relation to the updating of a range of policy, procedure and guidance for carers on child protection and behaviour management issues. The structure of professional psychology support for carers has been reviewed to make it more readily accessible and practical. A learning support assistant has been appointed to provide more flexible support of placed children's educational needs. The agency has put in place a process of regular monitoring of outcomes for children under the key Every Child Matters outcome areas to highlight any shortfalls and inform practice developments. The level of staffing in the branch has increased to better support the range of work now being undertaken. New systems for recording children's health care needs and treatment have been introduced.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service makes good provision for safeguarding and promoting children's health. Staff and carers pay good attention to obtaining as much background medical information on placed children as possible and putting plans in place to meet any needs that are identified. Carers make sure children are promptly registered with all relevant local health services, except where this is not part of agreed care plans. All accidents and illnesses are promptly reported and dealt with appropriately by carers. Carers and staff maintain clear records on any emerging health concerns and treatments provided for children to make sure their health 'history' is as accurate as possible and can be easily monitored to make sure their needs are being met. The agency helps ensure referrals are made to child mental health services where required. Attendance for subsequent course of treatment is well supported by carers. The agency is provided with relevant professional health advice by its medical adviser and specific expertise on child health is provided by one of the panel members. The service provides a range of relevant training for carers to support them in providing good health care and in promoting healthy lifestyles for the children they look after.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service pays excellent attention to the various areas of support, monitoring and care practice that help keep children in placement safe. The people running the service at the local level continue to be fit and appropriate to carry out these roles and the local manager is in the process of completing a management qualification to further enhance her skills. Other staff working at the branch are suitably qualified and experienced and the service ensures required checks on staff suitability are updated regularly. The suitability of the agency's central senior management staff was not assessed during this inspection. The physical safety and appropriateness of carer households is thoroughly assessed when carers are first approved, at subsequent household reviews and through regular unannounced visits by agency staff. The agency provides relevant training and guidance for carers to help make sure their households are safe places for children to live. The agency pays thorough attention to all areas of child protection policy, procedure and practice and makes sure all households have a clear written and agreed approach to safe caring. This is supplemented, where necessary, by more specific individual risk assessments where particular welfare concerns are anticipated, for example in relation to bedroom sharing. The agency provides initial and then regular updating training for staff and carers on child protection and safe caring. When child protection concerns arise the agency follows agreed procedures to ensure children are kept safe and cooperates fully with

investigations by area children's services staff. The agency makes appropriate notifications to the relevant external agencies to ensure any areas of possible concern can be adequately monitored. Carer files and related documents show good evidence of how concerns are followed up although a summary log of concerns and their resolution is not currently maintained on each file. Where necessary the agency takes the appropriate steps to review and/or terminate the approval of carers. The agency has appropriate policies, procedures and guidance in place to manage complaints from all relevant parties. No complaints have been received by the agency branch or by Ofsted since the last inspection. The agency pays detailed attention to matching procedures to try to ensure carers and placed children are suitably matched and this is largely reflected in the low rates of placement breakdown in the figures provided by the agency for this inspection. Where possible placements are planned, to allow periods of introduction and further assessment of matching. Where emergency placements take place good attention is paid to information exchange on children's needs and behaviours and to immediate support of carers. The agency follows up on such placements well to make sure subsequent planning and information sharing with the placing authority takes place promptly. Appropriate procedures are in place to consider exceptional placements that fall outside of carers current approval ranges. The agency provides carers with written guidance on behaviour management techniques and expectations and this guidance is being updated to improve its clarity. Training in this area is provided on a general basis for all carers as part of pre and post-approval training programmes. Where more complex and challenging behaviours have to be managed the agency supports carers in obtaining more in-depth training. The agency also provides access to professional psychology input to help carers manage behaviours, as part of its carer support strategy. Supervising social work staff maintain a good oversight of carers' management of behaviour via carer maintained records, supervision and monitoring of key events. The agency provides appropriate guidance for carers on managing unauthorised absences by children and any concerns arising about bullying. Carers carry out this guidance consistently. The agency carries out all required checks for new staff and for carers and maintains good evidence of this. In the light of recent updated government guidance the agency is reviewing its procedures for vetting and approving carers who might provide short-term or overnight support to existing approved carers, to ensure all required steps are being taken to ensure placed children's safety. The operation of the agency's fostering panel has not been fully inspected during this inspection as this is usually addressed as part of the inspection of the agency's headquarters branch. Assessment is therefore based on telephone contact with the panel chair and examination of recent panel minutes. The agency's panel is appropriately constituted, with good representation in all areas expected under the regulations and standards, and is supported by appropriate policies and procedures. The independent panel chair is suitably experienced in fostering and panel issues and receives relevant training for the role. The panel provides appropriate levels of scrutiny and challenge to carer assessments and household reviews and feeds back observations on practice issues to the agency to address. The panel is appropriately involved in consideration of any emergency changes to carer approvals that have been agreed by the agency's decision maker. The panel produces a detailed annual report on its own operations although this does not currently include any summary analysis of any key agency practice quality issues that the panel may have identified. The agency provides relevant training opportunities for the panel chair and panel members.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency branch currently lacks any carers from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, which means matching on the basis of race and ethnicity is difficult to achieve in some cases. Transracial placements are therefore occasionally made. The agency does however ensure proper consideration is paid to any shortfalls that arise in such placements as part of matching processes. It also makes sure carers are provided with relevant practical advice and support to fully meet placed children's needs in these areas. The agency is also planning to provide a cultural advisory service on a sessional basis to provide advice and guidance for specific placements. The agency provides training for staff and carers on diversity awareness and meeting the needs of children from diverse backgrounds. This inspection did not focus on any placements for children with disabilities but agency matching processes and resources are designed to identify and meet any needs in this area also. The agency works well to support children's educational achievement and progress. Figures provided by the agency indicate that the vast majority of placements across the agency maintain stable fulltime school attendance. Specific support on educational matters, particularly around negotiating new school placements is provided by a dedicated central staff team member in the agency. Carers maintain good day to day links with schools and support placed children well in their educational needs. Personal Education Plans (PEPs) are in place for most children. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support children who are out of school for short periods. This support is usually provided by carers themselves but the agency also makes use of a recently established learning support assistant post where needed. Effective monitoring of educational placements and achievements is maintained locally by the branch and centrally within the agency.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Carers and agency staff work very well to support and develop children's contact arrangements and links with families. The agency ensures the safety of carers and children is not compromised by contact arrangements and ensures placing authorities take appropriate steps to arrange supervision and transportation for contact where required. Carers encourage ongoing links and communication by children with their birth families where this is agreed as part of care planning. The agency provides a number of avenues for consultation with children in its care. Children are offered opportunities to contribute to carer household reviews, as well as to their own care reviews and can raise any concerns through the agency's complaints procedure. The agency, due in part to its small size and wide geographical spread, does not have any formal forums for consultation with children in its care at present, but does support their attendance at national consultation events. Children were formally consulted as part of a recent overall survey conducted by the agency to assess its success in meeting the expectations of Every Child Matters, the core government policy for improving outcomes for children. The agency is also careful to ensure the views of carers' own children are fully considered as part of initial assessments and household reviews. Child friendly information for children on their rights and expectations of the agency is provided as part of a comprehensive pack of information and materials given to children when first placed. The agency provides information for children on where to obtain independent advocacy support and, where necessary, supports them in accessing this.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

There are no key standards under this outcome area and it has therefore not been fully judged during this inspection. Carers are however happy with the level of, and systems for, payments of allowances and additional one-off expenditure. The agency provides a targeted level of training for carers in preparing young people for independence but is looking to extend this in future to all carers.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has an appropriate if brief statement of purpose in place covering the general operation and ethos of the agency. This is supplemented by reference to a range of policy documentation and more detailed information relating to the operation of services from the Thame branch. A more fulsome statement of purpose is planned by the agency for the future. The size of the staff team, which has increased since the last inspection, satisfactorily supports the range of managerial and direct practice functions carried out at the branch. The agency is sensitive to ensuring workloads at both managerial and social work levels are manageable and adjusts staffing resources accordingly. Central agency functions such as initial referral management, fostering panel, policy development and arrangements for staff and carer training complement the work of the local branch well. Staff in the branch are well organised and have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Staff are well managed and receive good support and guidance from the branch manager. The agency provides good access to training and further professional development opportunities for staff. Induction processes for new staff are thorough and well planned. Carer numbers are relatively small, with 15 households approved as of 31 March 2007, but there is steady growth and the branch is looking to focus on developing carer resources in the north of its current patch in the coming year. New carer assessments, which are carried out by branch staff, are thorough and well structured, providing good evidence of carer competencies and any areas for development. Carers are very well supported by the branch staff team. Carers receive very regular formal supervision visits, supplemented by ample levels of telephone contact and support at key meetings. A reliable out of hours duty service is in place. As already noted unannounced visits take place to carer households and comprehensive annual household reviews are held at the required intervals, or more frequently if required. Carers feel very valued by the staff team and are particularly appreciative of gestures such as gifts of flowers or chocolates at difficult times. The geographical spread of carers currently makes regular carer forums and meetings difficult to arrange but the agency branch intends that more meetings will take in the future as a result of more patch-based support structures. A comprehensive structure of pre and post approval training for carers is in place with a range of mandatory courses that are expected to be undertaken or updated in defined timescales. Incentives are offered for completion of required training and, conversely, any failure to take up expected training is addressed through supervision and household review processes. Carers are encouraged to undertake relevant National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) courses. Record keeping is of a very high standard with carers' and children's' files maintained in exemplary order enabling good consistent oversight of children's welfare and placement suitability. The overall level of administrative support is very good and computer-based records and data collection support paper records well in the day to day running of the service. Central records of key events and incidents are well maintained and monitored at local and central levels in the agency. The agency fully meets the expectations of the regulations and standards with regard to practice monitoring and there are thorough systems of central auditing and practice monitoring operated by senior central agency staff. A good structure of key performance indicators is in place and regularly reported against by branch staff to help ensure practice

standards remain high. The agency has good systems in place for obtaining feedback from placing authorities about the quality of placements provided and from carers and placed children in order to inform quality in improvements across the agency.

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):

- considers introduction of a specific section in carer files to summarise the nature and outcome of any concerns that may arise about the quality of care offered (NMS 25)
- considers the introduction of section in the annual fostering panel report that summarises any key findings by the panel in relation the quality of agency practice (NMS 30)

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.