

Fosterplus

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fosterplus is a privately owned independent fostering agency which is registered as a limited company. The head office is based in Bedfordshire. The agency has six separately registered offices in England and also runs a fostering service in Scotland. The agency provides respite, 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 branch currently supports 17 carer households with 20 children.

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**.

This independent fostering agency provides a good level of foster care for the young people accommodated. This is achieved by its provision of therapeutic services and its well trained and experienced staff and carers, who are in turn well supervised and managed. Additionally, young people's educational progress is well supported by the agency's educational provision. The agency has clear service development plans in place.

There are three recommendations made as a result of this inspection. These involve recruiting more carers from minority ethnic groups, making arrangements which ensure the children and young people can be better informed about the service and service development, and small corrections to the Statement of Purpose.

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 that the fostering service has a clear statement of purpose. Specifically, that it contains the correct staffing complement and the correct contact details for Ofsted (NMS 16.1)
- ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support (NMS 1.3)
- ensure that children are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. (NMS 2.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people benefit from stable placements where they feel secure and part of the fostering family household. One young person commented: 'I'm really happy where I am, they couldn't be helping me more. I'm really grateful for the changes that they have made to my life.'

Due to the careful recruitment and assessment of carers and the careful matching, children and young people very rarely experience unplanned endings to their placements; this has resulted in there being only one fostering placement breakdown in the past 12 months. This was appropriately reviewed and the agency ensured that learning points were applied to practice.

Social workers from the placing authorities do not always encourage younger children to attend their care plan reviews. However, the agency ensures that there are good arrangements in place to ensure that all children and young people are able to actively participate in day-to-day and more complex decisions about their lives, including all aspects of their individual care planning. There are arrangements in place to consult children about their proposed placement and to ensure that the placement is of their choice. Children say they are given all the information they need about their proposed foster carers, both verbally and in writing. Carers construct written personal profiles about themselves and their households which help children in making decisions about their choice of placement.

The agency has a referrals officer who attempts to ensure that all young people and carers are appropriately matched. Birth parents are generally invited to attend the initial and review meetings of care plans, unless this is otherwise thought to be detrimental, and also contribute their opinions about the suitability of placements.

There is currently an imbalance in the numbers of children placed from minority ethnic groups and the carers available from these groups. However, young people say that their cultural and racial differences are respected. Appropriate advice and guidance provided by the agency has meant that carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs of the young people in their care, and young people report that they have been supported in attending community events related to their culture.

Young people are provided with good avenues of support and representation while they are being looked after. However, the agency does not provide regular forum meetings, newsletters or a webpage specifically for looked after children and this may restrict them from communicating their views on all aspects of their care and support and about the development of the service.

Young people confirm that they receive pocket money and are encouraged to open savings accounts, which is good preparation for independent living. They confirm that they are taken on holiday with their carers and that they have experienced a wide range of activities and weekend events while in their foster placements. Several young people spoken to were members of social or sporting clubs. These measures promote children's enjoyment, life experiences, help them to better integrate into their local community, and improve their self-confidence.

Disabled children and young people are well supported by the agency. There are a number of fostering households with skills in caring for disabled children. The agency has provided carers with specialist training which is specifically related to the children that they are caring for, including training on caring for children with autistic spectrum disorders.

The agency has a commitment to the provision of therapeutic services. A branch of the organisation has a team of therapeutic professionals available which includes a psychiatrist, child and educational psychologists, and play, art and music therapists. This means that children requiring therapeutic services do not have to wait to be seen by the child and adolescent mental health services teams. The agency has trained carers in recognised therapeutic models of care. These various therapeutic services ensure that disabled children and children with special needs have access to a high level of care provided by well-trained professionals and carers.

Young people's health is promoted in a number of ways. Young people's health histories are well recorded in a children's health record. Carers have a responsibility for updating these, and children may keep and take them with them to future placements. This ensures they have a good record of their medical history. The agency completes a health information form which draws upon and extends the information contained in the looked after child's health record. Children receive an initial medical examination from the medical practitioners attached to their placing authority which the agency follows up if it has not been done. This ensures carers have as much information as possible about the children for whom they are caring. Carers link well with the looked after children's nurses from the placing authorities. All carers receive mandatory training in first aid. This ensures children's health needs are understood and well met, and appropriate assistance is available in an emergency.

The agency is active in helping young people with smoking cessation, addressing drug and alcohol misuse, promoting sexual health and healthy lifestyle programmes. Children are given an excellent welcome pack in the form of a good quality backpack containing a wealth of written contact information about a range of helping agencies.

Children receive good support in making educational progress and in preparing for independent living. This is achieved by the provision of education advisors who are trained teachers. All of the young people fostered by the agency attend school or college. Many of these young people were previously non school attenders, or were failing to make educational progress. There have been no long-term school exclusions in the past 12 months. All young people have personal education plans in place and these plans are appropriately reviewed. Older young people are being prepared for independence through sessional workers conducting an independent living skills programme with them and carers are included in this work. The programme is based on helping young people cope with the practical issues of everyday living. Pathway plans are in place for young people nearing the end of mandatory school education and these are appropriately reviewed.

Young people are supported by carers in maintaining contact with their birth relatives as directed by their care plans. They help them with transport to attend contact meetings. This further enhances the support given to birth families and to children in maintaining these important links. There are approved carers specifically assessed and trained to provide parent and child placements. This type of foster care provides placing authorities with an assessment of parenting capability and provides families with a parenting skills service which helps children to maintain links with their birth families while at the same time keeping children safe.

Quality of service

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

Children benefit from being placed with carers who are well trained and prepared for the fostering task and who are focused on the needs of children and young people. Carers are recruited, prepared, assessed, trained and supervised to a high level. Carers come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences and include single carers, same sex carers and carer couples who are both dedicated full time to the fostering task. Assessments are rigorous, and both the preparation training and ongoing training are of a high standard. Carers commented that this was of benefit later when they were approved to care for children. Carers' assessments are completed within recommended timescales and the manager of the service carries out regular quality monitoring of social workers' assessments to ensure that placements will be secure and stable.

Carers undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council qualification immediately after approval and are encouraged by financial incentive to undertake a higher award which gives them a range of further skills to further promote children's care. The ongoing support of carers through forum meetings and supervision is of a high standard. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering and this enhances their knowledge and understanding of the fostering task.

The fostering panel has an experienced chair, and recommendations made by the

panel adhere to clear policies and procedures designed to ensure that only suitable people are approved who will provide children with stable placements. The composition of the panel is appropriate in terms of necessary professional expertise and personal experience, although there are no panel members from minority ethnic groups. There is a central list of members in accordance with regulations. Panel members are well trained and supervised, with an annual performance appraisal being undertaken to ensure their ongoing competence. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail of the discussions of issues raised by panel members and give evidence that there is due rigour in the considerations of foster carers' approval. Recommendations made to the agency decision maker are responded to in a timely manner and this reduces the time that children have to wait for appropriate placements.

Foster carers have good access to a range of health and education services and to the therapeutic services available from the sister agency within the organisation; this means that they are able to give children a higher level of support. Carers say that the educational support that they and young people receive from the agency education advisors is of a high standard and the advisors ensure that all young people are attending school and achieving to their capacity, and that personal education or pathway plans are in place and appropriately updated .

Foster carers have good working relationships with the fostering service. There is an excellent out-of-hours support service run by the manager and supervising social workers, which provides them with an excellent level of support.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Young people comment that they feel safe and that if they are unhappy about any element of their care they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns. Complaints are investigated and responded to within determined timescales, thus ensuring that children's concerns are attended to without delay.

A policy is in place to address any incidents of bullying, and children are given information leaflets to advise them where they can go to get help in this regard. Children felt confident that any bullying incidents reported to the agency would be dealt with effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service provided by their placing authority which provides them with a further avenue of support.

Staff are well trained in safeguarding children, and this training is regularly updated. Foster carers receive a high level of training as part of their preparation, and ongoing training, which includes a focus on safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice. This training is refreshed over time and takes place before and after approval. Foster carers also receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children. This ensures that carers have a clear

understanding of safeguarding and can provide safe care. Carers demonstrate an awareness of current theoretical knowledge and the impact of abuse on a child's behaviour and development, thus helping them to understand how fostered children's needs can best be met.

There are good systems in place to check that the care of young people is safe. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place more than once a year. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Any concerns about foster carers' care practice which is identified by supervising social workers is shared with management and this can result in the reconsideration of carers' approval. Staff and carers' recruitment and vetting are thorough and organised to ensure that staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep children safe. Staff and carers' files are subject to periodic audit to ensure that vetting practice is kept up to date.

There are no incidences of children going missing within the past 12 months and foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care and the procedures to be followed should this occur. The manager of the service states there is a good collaborative relationship with the local police and that they take seriously the safety of looked after children who go missing and will actively search for them.

Leadership and management

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

The performance and delivery of the fostering service are well monitored and formally reported on to the senior managers at least every two months. This ensures that the level of care that fostered children receive within this agency is constantly being scrutinized by senior management. Action plans identify areas of necessary service development, including the proposed change of office base, where the agency hopes to provide a room for contact and a carer training facility. They also plan to conduct a campaign to recruit carers from minority ethnic groups, thus expanding choice of placement for young people from these groups.

In order to make sure that fostered children's needs are properly attended to and practice is professionally applied, social work staff are appointed who are competent, trained, supervised and well supported. Social workers have a post-qualifying award in childcare work. There is an extensive induction process for new staff which acquaints them with the necessary core skills. Appraisals of social workers and managers' competency take place at least annually. The manager of the service is a professionally qualified, registered social worker who has many years experience in childcare management and an appropriate management qualification. These good levels of support and management ensure that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals.

Foster carers' support group meetings, ongoing training and information events are

available and this further ensures that children are cared for by informed and professional carers who contribute to the development of the service. Managers of the service have developed a working relationship with other agencies, including the placing authorities, police, education and health services, to ensure that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting looked after children's needs.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the service's aims and objectives. However, the contact details of Ofsted and the detail of the staffing complement are incorrect, thus giving inaccurate information to those who read it. The children's guide is available in collective leaflet form and is also available in audio form which makes it more accessible and inclusive for children below reading age, or who have a reading difficulty for whatever reason. There are two social events for young people, carers and birth parents which are enjoyed by all. These arrangements add to the 'sense of family' that the agency promotes.

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.