

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 a 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, three 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. 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

This was an announced inspection carried out by one inspector over the course of three days. The inspection concentrated on the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services that have been identified by Ofsted as most important to the safeguarding and promoting of children's welfare. The judgements in this report have been made using new Ofsted benchmarking guidance that was implemented on 1 April 2008. Information about this guidance can be found on the Ofsted website. The new basis for making judgements is not directly comparable with that used previously.

The Thame branch of Fosterplus continues to provide and support foster care placements that offer stable, consistent and high quality care to children and young people. 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. Excellent attention is paid to meeting diversity needs arising from children's differing backgrounds and care needs. Educational stability and progress is very well 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.

Support systems for carers are excellent and are complemented by very good training and development opportunities. 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 requirements or recommendations have been made following this inspection

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection two recommendations were made which have been fully addressed by the agency. A much clearer system has been put in place for logging and monitoring concerns about carer practice and fostering panel members now have opportunities to contribute their overall views on the quality of key areas of agency practice.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service has good arrangements in place for safeguarding and promoting children's health. Supervising social work staff and carers ensure they obtain as much background medical information on placed children as possible and put plans in place to meet any needs that are identified. Carers make sure children are promptly registered with all relevant local health services and all accidents and illnesses are promptly reported and dealt with appropriately. Carers and staff maintain excellent records on any emerging health concerns and treatments provided for children to make sure an accurate health history is maintained and can be passed on to other carers if necessary. Health issues and concerns form part of the comprehensive monthly reporting provided by the agency to placing authorities for each placed child. The agency helps ensure referrals are made to child mental health services where required, alongside providing ready access to consultation for carers on managing mental health concerns in placement.

The agency is provided with relevant professional health advice by its medical adviser with regard to carer assessments and approvals and specific expertise on child health is provided by one of the panel members. The service provides a good 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. The agency has appropriate policies in place regarding smoking in carer households.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The service pays excellent attention to ensuring the safety of children placed with its carers. The people running the service at this branch continue to be fit and appropriate to carry out this role and the registered manager has completed 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. No concerns have arisen since the last inspection about the suitability of local or central agency management staff, or the way in which the agency is run.

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. Unannounced visits are well planned and recorded and, through the deliberate use of staff who do not usually support the particular households visited, offer a fresh view on the quality of care being offered. 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 general approach to

safe caring, alongside individual safe caring plans for each child placed. 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. Additional specific targeted training for male carers has also been provided.

When child protection concerns arise the agency follows appropriate procedures to ensure children are kept safe and cooperates fully with any 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 rigorously followed up and new formats to log all levels of concern about carer practice are being used effectively to monitor any patterns or trends.

The agency has appropriate policies, procedures and guidance in place to manage complaints from all relevant parties. Complaints received by the agency branch are followed up appropriately. No complaints have been made directly to Ofsted.

The agency pays excellent attention to matching procedures to try to ensure carers and placed children are suitably matched and this is reflected in low rates of placement breakdown. 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 may fall outside of carers current approval ranges. Carers confirm that they feel able to properly consider placements before they are made and feel suitably protected from inappropriate placements by their supervising social workers.

The agency provides carers with clear written guidance on behaviour management techniques and expectations. Training on appropriate management of challenging behaviours is provided as part of pre and post-approval training programmes. The agency also provides access to professional psychology consultation as part of its carer support strategy, to help carers manage behaviours safely and effectively. Supervising social work staff maintain a good oversight of carers' management of behaviour through carer maintained records, regular supervision and monitoring of key events. Carers report very positively on the quality of day to day advice and support from supervising social workers on managing behaviour. 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, for carers and for their support networks and maintains good evidence of this. Good systems are in place to ensure all such checks are regularly updated as required.

The operation of the agency's fostering panel was assessed as part of the separate Ofsted inspection of the agency's head office in Bedfordshire and was therefore not looked at as part of this inspection. That separate inspection did not raise any concerns about panel operations and the one requirement made has now been addressed. Scrutiny of the recent annual fostering

panel report, as part of this inspection, confirms that the panel maintains good oversight of, and challenge to, the agency's practice.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency branch continues to be unsuccessful in recruiting carers from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, which limits placement and matching options based on race and ethnicity. Transracial and transcultural placements may therefore occasionally be made, if deemed to be in children's best interests by placing authorities. The agency does however ensure proper consideration is paid, as part of matching processes, to any shortfalls that arise in such placements. Carers are provided with relevant practical advice and support to fully meet placed children's needs in these areas and, where relevant, staff from particular ethnic and cultural backgrounds are appointed to provide specific support and input. The agency provides training for staff and carers on diversity awareness and meeting the needs of children from diverse backgrounds and a good framework of policy and guidance on diversity and equal opportunities is in place. 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. Specific training on safe care for children with disabilities has been provided for the agency's staff.

The agency works extremely well to support children's educational achievement and progress. Figures provided by the agency indicate that currently all children of school age in placement are maintaining largely stable 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 are in place for 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 learning support assistant post where needed. Very effective monitoring of educational placements and achievements is maintained locally by the branch and centrally within the agency. This has recently been extended to include broader areas of children's recreational and developmental achievements.

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. Through careful risk assessment procedures the agency ensures the safety of carers and children is not compromised by contact arrangements and also ensures placing authorities take appropriate steps to arrange supervision and transportation for contact where required. Agency staff will occasionally provide direct assistance with aspects of contact arrangements. Where particularly complex arrangements for contact are in place the agency ensures these are carefully and formally planned in conjunction with carers and placing authorities.

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 regular formal

forums for consultation with children in its care at present, but does support their attendance at national consultation events. Children have in the past been consulted as part of an 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 and occasional social events are also held for this group of young people. Carers are complimentary about the level of attention paid by the agency to the needs and views of their own children.

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 good.

The agency supports carers well in preparing older young people for moving on to independence and leaving care. The agency has developed a clear framework of expectations for carers in this area backed up by the planned use of specific independence 'workbooks' that will complement placing authority's pathway plans. Appropriate training in this area is provided for carers alongside access to specialist advice from within the broader agency staff team.

The agency provides a good level of allowances for carers and systems for payment work promptly and smoothly. On top of regular allowances the agency does ensure that any individual specific needs of young people can be met by carers through provision of additional funding or one-off payments.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has an appropriate 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. This provides a helpful and accurate picture for placing authorities of the services offered.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. As noted already under the Enjoying and Achieving outcome section of this report, despite a lack of diversity in the carers supported by the agency, excellent attention is paid to meeting the individual and diverse needs of placed young people and to ensuring staff and carers have a good understanding of the importance of diversity and equality issues.

The size of the staff team, which has increased further 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. Staff have good administrative and information technology support. 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 very well organised and have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced for the roles and tasks they undertake. The agency provides good access to training and further professional development opportunities for staff. Induction processes for new staff are thorough and well planned. Staff are very well supported through formal supervision and by access to ongoing advice and support from local and central managerial staff. The temporary absence of the branch manager earlier in the year was covered satisfactorily through support from managers elsewhere in the agency. Formal annual appraisals are undertaken to help ensure staff performance and development remains at a high level.

Carer numbers remain relatively small, with 15 households approved at the time of this inspection. 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. Staff have recently received updating training on assessments to complement the newer style of assessment now being undertaken.

Carers receive excellent support from 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. There is ready access to consultation with psychology and education experts and good provision of practical advice in the comprehensive carer handbook. Local meetings for carers have developed in one area since the last inspection and are proving a popular addition to the existing range of support. Carers seen during this inspection simply could not think of anything more the agency could do to support them in their work.

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. The agency has made very good progress in implementation of the new Children's Workforce Development Council training and development framework for foster carers.

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. Central records such as monitoring reports, notifications and the carer register are equally well maintained.

Central records of key events and incidents are diligently 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 as a whole is reflective on its practice and is keen to improve in the light of research, carer, young people and placing authority views and responds appropriately to any new legislative expectations.

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):