

St. Christopher's Fostering Branch Office

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Date of last inspection	29/09/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a small independent fostering agency providing support to 19 children and young people in the Essex area. The agency has 20 foster households and is actively recruiting more. The fostering agency is able to provide task centred fostering, short breaks, and longer term placements. The fostering agency is also developing a specialist fostering scheme in partnership with the local authority.

The fostering agency has separate branches in Putney and Sandwell, which have been operating under the umbrella of the Southend branch. However, these require separate registration as fostering services in their own right. Discussions regarding this will take place separate to this inspection.

The fostering agency is part of the St Christopher's Fellowship which is a registered charity. The St Christopher's Fellowship nationally provides a variety of services to children, young people and young adults in need.

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 **adequate**.

The fostering service is adequately effective. The service is child focused and demonstrates a commitment to enhancing children's lives. Children are making good progress particularly in relation to their educational attainment and emotional well-being. For a child to be missing from care is an unusual event.

Children benefit from stable placements and placement breakdown is rare. Such continuity of care enables children and carers to build strong attachments with each other.

Foster carers are caring and committed ensuring good outcomes for children. Foster carers are well supported which enables them to meet the demands of their role. Foster carers benefit from a wide variety of training, however, the agency fails to ensure that all carers complete the programme of core training. Children are able to

influence decision making. Equality and diversity is threaded through the service.

Quality assurance and administration systems are not sufficiently robust. The leadership and management teams were not fully aware of the shortfalls in the service. These include fully maintaining records, staff induction, carer training, and evidencing robust recruitment processes for panel members. There were detailed discussions with senior managers within the organisation regards registering other services independently of the fostering agency. The organisation has given strong indication that applications for the registration of these services will be submitted in a timely manner.

Areas for 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.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in schedule 6 with a view to improving the quality of foster care. Provide a copy of the said report to Ofsted (regulation 35 (1) & (2))	04/10/2012
20 (2011)	ensure that the fostering service provider does not employ a person until full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in schedule 1; in particular ensure all checks are evidenced as carried out in respect of panel members (regulation 20(3)(c))	09/08/2012
30 (2011)	ensure that case records for foster parents and others contain all required information. In particular a signed copy of each foster care agreement and minutes of annual reviews held. (regulation 30 (1) & (2)(d) & (e))	06/09/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure that individual household safe care policies are sufficiently detailed to reflect the particular household and child in placement (NMS 4)
- ensure that a suitably detailed medication policy and guidance is in place for foster carers (NMS 6)
- ensure a good quality induction programme is in place for staff (NMS 23.1)

- ensure that each foster care has a personal development plan and that carers complete all core mandatory training specified by the agency (NMS 20)
- review management information systems in order to identify patterns and trends. Provide written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the fostering service every three months (NMS 25)
- ensure there are efficient and robust administrative systems, including IT and communication systems. (NMS 27.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Children are nurtured and thrive within stable, secure and happy environments. Placement breakdown is rare and some young people stay with their carers after their 18th birthday. Children are placed with carers who are committed to their welfare and who are able to meet their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Children with special needs benefit from carers who are able to meet those needs arising from their disability. Children benefit from individualised child-focused care which accommodates their diverse heritage and life experiences. Carers provide a safe environment where children are able to reflect on their past experiences helping them develop a positive self-view and understanding of their background.

Children's' experiences of the fostering service are sound and they rate the service as good. Children highlight positive relationships with office based staff in the fostering agency. Some children felt that their individual carers were outstanding and were extremely positive people in their life, referring to being given a new beginning. For example one young person comments included 'They are like my parents, they are my everything.' Similarly a placing authority referred to another child proudly referring to their long-term carer as 'mum'. Children said they felt consulted about decisions in their day-to-day life and understood why boundaries are set.

Children have made good individual progress in the time they have been living with their carers. Strong attachments develop between children and the foster families who nurture them to develop good emotional resilience. This underpins the success in effecting change for some children.

Children are treated as part of the family enjoying being involved in key family events and holidays. Children refer to the sometimes very strong bonds they have with foster siblings and how positive these can be both as role models and someone to talk to of a younger age group. Risk-taking behaviours, such as going missing, have reduced and are rare. Children say they feel safe and well cared for. Children are able to pursue interests and hobbies secure in the knowledge that any equipment required will be provided.

Children have been able to develop new friendships and maintain existing ones, helping them to have more rounded peer support. Children are actively supported to

maintain family contact in line with their wishes.

Children are healthy and are aware of how to maintain healthy lifestyles. Children are encouraged to eat healthily and undertake regular physical activity. Children have access to specialist health professionals, such as child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), paediatric consultants and speech and language therapists. Young people informally develop self-care and independence skills as appropriate to their age, such as getting involved in shopping, cooking and learning to do their own laundry. The fostering agency has neglected to include advice and guidance on the management of medication in the recent edition of the foster carers' handbook.

Children are supported to maximise their educational potential. The fostering service has a range of intervention and support which is particularly strong in enabling children to access good quality education and make good progress. For example, children have made good improvements in school attendance enabling a 95% school attendance rate across the fostering agency. There are particular examples of children of secondary school age who could not read when coming to their carer, developing their skills to the point where their reading levels are on par with their peers. Another example is of a child who was out of education, and who had no interest in education, completely turning around to the point of becoming a school prefect. This has boosted both children's confidence and self-esteem as well as their overall life chances.

Children clearly benefit from the fostering service's efforts to promote their educational success. Children are supported to do well in school and carers are aware of each child's individual educational progress and goals. Educational consultants engaged by the agency are vociferous in chasing up education departments and ensuring good school and college placements. The agency has effective systems for monitoring the educational outcomes of children. Children know that their carers will be there to watch their school plays, attend parents' evenings and cheer for them on sports day. Young people refer to carers who help them reach their goals and 'help them sort out part time work and apprenticeships.' One young person told how for them foster care has been a real success story. They had changed from a 'broken child with no self confidence, limited schooling and friends', to a new person who has a settled home with people who care about them, strong self esteem and clear aspirations which they are on course to achieve .

Quality of service

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

The agency is highly successful in preventing placement breakdown and ensuring continuity of attachments for children. External professionals regularly involved with the agency are very positive about their experiences referring to skilled, competent and committed carers. External professionals also refer to an effective fostering agency which puts children and young people at the centre of everything it does. Carers speak very highly of the levels of support they experience. Young people are mostly highly positive about the care that they receive.

Positive working relationships with carers ensure that they feel respected and valued. This translates into a low turnover of carers, many of whom have been caring for the children in placement for a number of years. Low levels of placement disruption and breakdown enable carers to build solid relationships and attachments upon which children can be nurtured. Foster carers are provided with all the information in the agency's possession before accepting a placement. Where information becomes available after a child has been placed then this information is also passed to the carer. This means that carers are able to support young people with full knowledge of their needs and background. Foster carers ensure that care and support provided is in accordance with the care plan devised by the local authority. Foster carers are part of the team around the child and particularly in long-term placements their views are respected and taken into consideration.

Carers demonstrate a solid commitment to ensuring the best life outcomes for children. Carers attend all educational events and plays so that young people know that there is someone there for them. Carers ensure that children's physical, health and emotional needs are met. Carers ensure that children's diverse needs are met through individually tailored care. The diversity of carers is reflected by the demographics of the area in which the agency is situated. Where there are gaps in matches then additional training and guidance is sourced to ensure that carers are able to meet the child's needs. For example, carers have received guidance in skin and hair care for children of dual heritage. This was the first time their personal care needs relating to racial background had been recognised and addressed. Thus enabling them to have more awareness of their heritage and building their self-esteem. Where children with special needs, such as autism, have been placed carers have received training and guidance on understanding autism and supporting their foster child's development. All carers are able to attend training in managing challenging behaviour and diffusion techniques. Support workers are available to provide practical assistance to carers when dealing with specific challenges. This training and support has enabled carers to be successful in introducing boundaries for young people.

The agency is currently targeting recruitment towards people who are interested in becoming specialist foster carers. This is in response to needs identified by the local authority. The needs of carers and their families are always considered before information about a possible placement match is passed to the carer. Carers are central in this decision-making process and are not pressured to take a placement. Carers say that the agency maintains a strong focus on the quality of the placement match and that they are never pressured to accept a child unless they are sure they can meet their needs.

The agency has a robust panel process which ensures assessment of the suitability of carers is thoroughly explored. The panel benefits from a wide variety of experience and expertise. Decisions are clearly documented, reached in a timely manner and effectively shared with carers. The panel has a strong quality assurance role. Changes to the membership over the last year have further enhanced its ability to make good quality decisions about prospective carers.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers focuses on the needs of young people and prepares carers for the role they are to undertake. Carers are well supported through regular support groups and monthly visits they have from their supervising social workers. Staffing vacancies resulted in some significant gaps in visits to some carers in the early part of 2012. However, carers emphasised that they never felt alone and that the manager and other staff kept in frequent contact and gave support and advice as required. Sessional and support workers are employed by the agency to provide practical help to carers such as getting young people to school or facilitating contact. The needs of the whole of the fostering family are considered in these visits as well as the fostered child. Older birth children are able to access the skills to foster training offered to their parents as part of the preparation of the whole fostering family.

Foster carers have access to wide variety of relevant training organised by the agency. Carers are able to request particular training which they feel would be helpful and relevant. Carers who find it difficult to attend training during the day have access to a package of online training. Most carers who have been approved for over a year have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council training standards. Workshops have been arranged to support carers through this process. Not all carers have a completed personal development plan. The agency has a wide variety of relevant training for carers and financial incentives to encourage carers to attend. However, not all carers have completed the core training identified by the agency as required for all carers.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The agency has sound arrangements for safeguarding young people and there are clear links with Local Safeguarding Children Boards and any concerns about children's safety are reported appropriately.

Children are safeguarded from unsuitable people gaining employment in the agency either as staff, or as a carer, through robust vetting practices. No staff or carer is employed until checks on identity; employment history and suitability of character have been undertaken. Carers are subject to additional checks in line with best practice. All carers, back up carers and staff are subject to having Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks updated every three years. The agency also has recently begun updating carer assessments every three years to reflect fully changes in households and carers skills. However, the agency fails to fully evidence the recruitment checks which have been undertaken to ensure panel members suitability. For example, evidence of identity checks and validation of professional qualifications are not held on file. The suitability of some references was unclear. Records are maintained of all panel members having had CRB checks undertaken.

Children said they felt safe and were safe. Children reported that they did not experience bullying and were confident that if they did their carers would act to

ensure their safety. Children are provided with information about how to complain in the children's pack which is given to all children when they first come into the fostering service. Information is also displayed in the agency's office. Children said that in most cases they would speak to their social worker or family and friends about any concerns they had. Carers are clear about children's rights and how they can support them to access an independent advocate.

The agency is proactive in safeguarding children who have a history of going missing from care. Children placed with carers rarely go missing, for some children this has been a significant area of personal growth. Children are helped to understand the risks associated with going missing and their individual vulnerability. When children do go missing carers take every action to safeguard them from coming to any harm. Carers try to contact them, locate them, and notify the appropriate agencies in line with local guidelines ensuring their safety. These actions serve to minimise the length of time children go missing and minimise the likelihood of harm. The nurturing environments provided mean that children have someone to talk to about things that are worrying them and this prevents children feeling the need to run.

Carers' initial preparation for fostering training focuses on caring for children who have experienced abuse. Foster carers are offered further training on safeguarding as part of the core training programme; however, not all have attended. Carers are sensitive to the issues relating to children who may have experienced abuse and are able to gain support from the fostering agency's psychologist in managing what children disclose to them. Carers are made aware of all issues known to the agency and feel they receive good advice and support. However, individual household safe care guidelines are not always sufficiently detailed. For example, they are not specific to the child, nor do they outline clearly the child's needs and how they will be supported in the individual household. Carers are able to receive support from the psychologist if an allegation is made against them. Child protection allegations against carers are rare. The agency follows guidance from the local safeguarding team in respect of managing any such allegations. The manager has put in place clear systems to address where there has been a historical lack of clarity between the agency and local authority as to whether an issue is defined as a standard of care investigation or child protection investigation.

Unannounced visits to carers' households are carried out at least once a year. These visits are comprehensive taking into account the child's needs, the fostering household composition and any health and safety issues.

Leadership and management

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

The agency is managed by an appropriately qualified and experienced manager who ensures that child-focused care is central to all activities within the fostering service. Carers and young people enjoy positive relationships with office based staff and regularly pop in. The agency has positive links with other agencies, including placing

authorities, education departments and local looked after children's health teams. All of whom speak very positively of the fostering agency. The majority of requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been met. One recommendation regarding the standard of induction for staff remains outstanding. There has been a substantial recruitment drive with four new social work and social work support staff being employed in the past six months. Staff feel that the induction process does not fully equip them for the roles they are to undertake. The organisation wide induction pack is provided to all staff, this gives little information about the fostering service specifically, or about specialist roles that new staff will be fulfilling, such as development of the specialist foster care service.

Staff are able to access all training available to carers and access further specialist training which they feel would be of benefit. Staff receive effective regular supervision and benefit from service wide good practice discussions. Staff terms and conditions within the organisation are being changed and this is having an impact on staff morale. Staff do not feel that the organisation as a whole is particularly good at listening to suggestions and comments from staff.

Administration systems are not always sufficiently robust to evidence the care given. The agency has recently gone to keeping electronic records and documents loaded onto the computerised system are not always signed copies, information including foster care agreements is missing and some assessments have been scanned without ensuring that the full document is viewable. The impact of this is that key information is not always accessible. The implementation of this system has taken up much staff time. Staff are finding it is creating more administrative processes which in turn reduce the amount of time they are able to spend with carers. Similarly quality assurance systems are not being fully developed to enable clear monitoring of significant incidents such as complaints, child protection and outcomes for children as a group. The manager has yet to establish an effective quality assurance system which gives a full strategic overview of the service, ensuring that all stakeholder views are ascertained.

There were detailed discussions with senior managers within the organisation regards registering other services independently of the fostering agency. The organisation has given strong indication that applications for the registration of these services will be submitted in a timely manner.

The agency has good capacity for improvement having taken on board comments for consideration during the inspection and identifying areas where the manager feels that the service could improve. The management team have identified some areas for growth. The management team plan to introduce new assessment and monitoring tools and attachment style interviews, which will help to clearly monitor each child's individual needs, growth and development across a number of key areas. However, management reports about the running of the agency have not been completed, which means that directors and senior managers within the agency may not have all of the key information about the agency is running on a day-to-day basis.

The agency is sufficiently resourced to meet the needs of children. The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are clear and detailed. The managers are making improvements to the children's guide to make it available in different mediums and, therefore, more accessible.

Young people overwhelmingly said that they were consulted about all aspects of their day to day care by their carers. Carers and young people are encouraged to air their views about the fostering agency through surveys and regular social events. Support workers plan to take an active role in developing children and young people's participation and in a children's rights role. There is an established pattern for this in one of the agency's other offices. Participation within the organisation as a whole is strong, and young people are encouraged to get involved in the organisation's 'challenge for change' programme. However, this is somewhat newer to the fostering service and is yet to become fully and effectively embedded.

Complaints about the service are rare and where there have been issues raised by carers these are thoroughly investigated with a clear focus on improving practice. Carers feel exceptionally well supported by the organisation and rate the levels of support as excellent. One carer summed this up as 'when things are good they are good but when things get tough, they are fantastic.' Carers are a core member of the team around the child and are well respected. Carers feel that their views and opinions are listened to and given full consideration. The agency is strong at advocating for carers views to be taken on board by other agencies.

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.