

Hope Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Janet Manders
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Address	Castle Cavendish Works Dorking Road Radford Nottingham NG7 5PN
Telephone number	0115 9003177
Email	
Registered person	Hope Fostering Services
Registered manager	Jennifer Garner
Responsible individual	Bovell Anthony Palmer
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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

Hope Fostering is based in Nottingham and provides placements for young people from local authorities from the East Midlands region. The agency focuses upon the placement of young people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups. Young people are placed with suitable families who are able to meet the needs of the young people in terms of culture, religion, ethnicity, gender and age. Foster carers are assessed against strict criteria, which includes their ability to nurture the young person, to keep them safe and healthy, to provide and support an enjoyable and educational experience and to enable the young person to participate positively within the community. The service will liaise closely with the local authority. Support for the young person will be paramount – this will incorporate full sharing of appropriate information with them and their views and evaluation of the service will be actively sought.

Summary

This is an announced key inspection. It focuses on the 17 key Standards relevant to this fostering service. These include National Minimum Standards (NMS) relating to health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The inspection also included consideration of additional standards relating to helping young people to prepare for independent living, the management of the agency and the support to foster carers.

Hope Fostering is a relatively new agency, which approved its first foster carers in September 2008 and provided its first placement for a young person in December 2008. The agency has provided two further placements since this time.

Hope Fostering is judged as satisfactory overall. The agency has outstanding outcomes in enabling young people to enjoy and achieve their potential and in encouraging young people to positively contribute to planning their care. High levels of supervision and support for foster carers help to safeguard young people. The agency values diversity and its promotion of equality for staff, foster carers and young people is excellent

The inspection found shortfalls in staff vetting and recruitment, a lack of clarity regarding who can give medical consent and the tasks required to meet young people's needs, as the agency has not used a foster placement agreement. There are weaknesses in the matching process as young people have been placed outside foster carers approval. Additionally, there is no robust system for monitoring the operation of the agency. As a result the setting does not fully underpin and evidence effective work with young people.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the first inspection of this service.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Hope Fostering promotes the physical, mental and emotional health of young people placed with the agency.

The agency attempts to gather all available information regarding a young person's health needs prior to placement, to enable suitable foster carers to be identified to care for the young person. However, due to the emergency nature of most placements, detailed health information has not been available prior to the placement being made. In these cases the agency makes every effort to obtain this information soon after the placement has been made. All available information is shared with the foster carers so that they are able to meet the young person's needs. Consent for medical treatment was in place for young people, although it is not always clear who the consent is delegated to.

Foster carers ensure that young people's health needs are met by registering young people with local health care practitioners and keeping a record of health appointments and their outcomes. Specialist support, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are accessed where this is identified in the young person's care plan.

Young people's health is discussed as part of the regular supervision of foster carers and used to provide information for young people's reviews. Foster carers receive training in first aid and other relevant health related areas to enable them to meet young people's health needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The fostering service has in place acceptable policies and procedures to ensure that young people are provided with a safe, nurturing environment in which to live; however, gaps in some areas of implementation could potentially put young people at risk.

The agency has adequate procedures in relation to recruitment and staff vetting, which ensure that those who work for the agency are suitable to do so and have the necessary qualifications and skills to undertake their roles. However, the agency has not always followed these procedures and has not undertaken all necessary checks, for example following up references by telephone to ensure that the reference is authentic and covers all the available information. Files do not have a photograph of the member of staff, or a record of the recruitment interview.

The agency ensures foster homes are suitable for the young people who are placed there. Each young person has their own bedroom; this promotes young people's privacy. Supervising social workers visit the homes frequently and health and safety checks, including the safety of any transport used, is assessed at the time of approval; however, the records of checks have not always been accurately completed.

Young people have been placed with foster carers who have the skills to meet their needs. The agency has comprehensive procedures to ensure that young people are placed with suitable foster carers. The agency's procedures state that wherever possible the young person and their family are involved in the matching process and the young person has a planned programme of introduction. However, the agency is newly registered and has only a limited number of foster carers. The three placements the agency has made have all been emergency placements and whilst the foster carers were able to meet the young person's needs, all three placements were made outside the foster carers approval and workers had not completed the referral form to indicate why the particular foster carers were chosen.

The agency shares all available information with foster carers including recent risk assessments so that the foster carer has all the appropriate information to provide the necessary care for

the young person. The agency ensures that any gaps in the matching process are discussed at the placement meeting so that strategies to compensate for the gaps are agreed.

Young people's welfare is safeguarded by the agency's high priority in ensuring that foster carers are aware of how to keep young people safe. A considerable amount of time is spent during pre-approval training to provide prospective foster carers with information as to how to keep young people safe. The agency has clear policies and procedures, which are known by staff and foster carers if they have concerns about the safety of a young person. Foster carers are trained in safe caring practices as part of the pre-approval training and all foster homes have general safe caring guidelines which are established at the point of approval. However, not all safe caring guidelines have been updated to reflect any risks within the placement for the young people placed. Guidelines have not been signed or dated by the placing social worker, therefore the plans do not evidence that safe care plans are relevant to the young people in placement and that all risks have been assessed. This could potentially negatively impact on the young person's care.

The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced chairperson, who ensures that all issues are thoroughly explored before a decision as to applicants' suitability is made. The panel includes members with expertise in child health and education so it has a good blend of expertise, knowledge and experience. The panel is effective in raising the quality of work presented to them through their quality assurance role and do not agree to all recommendations made by assessors in respect of foster carer's approval, as their priority is to ensure the wellbeing of young people. The panel has not had the opportunity to undertake any training in respect of their roles and responsibilities; this has the potential that the panel will not be as effective as it could be.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Young people placed with foster carers are encouraged to enjoy and achieve as staff and carers are aware of the importance of promoting individual needs within the foster placement.

The agency demonstrates a high priority in meeting the demands of diversity through relevant policies, appropriate recruitment of staff and provides a range of foster carers that reflects the area's diverse multicultural population. The agency obtain all relevant information regarding a young person's needs to enable an appropriate match to be made so the specific needs of the young person's culture or ethnicity can be met. Where it is not possible to find a perfect match, provision will be put in place to support foster carers in meeting the needs of the young people. Staff ensure that issues of diversity and equality are considered throughout the placement, including it as a topic during regular supervision visits with foster carers. Foster carers encourage young people to participate in their religion and develop a positive sense of identity.

The agency has in place good policies, procedures and support to ensure that young people's educational needs are met in their widest sense. Excellent work has been undertaken by foster carers to develop young people's self-esteem and self-confidence.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Foster carers provide excellent support to young people to maintain their contact with family and friends, where this is consistent with the young person's care plan. Contact arrangements are considered as part of the matching process to ensure that the carer can meet the complex needs of young people's contact arrangements. Foster carers maintain well-structured records for young people including information relating to contact arrangements and visits. Contact arrangements are discussed on a regular basis as part of the foster carer's supervision and the agency provide training to foster carers regarding the importance of contact and their role in it.

The agency consults with young people and all interested parties to ensure that the agency continues to improve and to ensure that it meets the needs of the young people placed with its foster carers. Supervising social workers meet and talk very regularly with young people so as to offer them opportunities to raise issues about their placement or care plans. The agency is proactive in ensuring that the views of all young people are taken into consideration.

Young people are aware of how to make a complaint and are provided with information as to who to contact and what support is available to them; this information is included in the Children's Guide. If young people require additional assistance the agency will provide an independent advocate to ensure that the young person's voice is heard.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is satisfactory.

Foster carers provide excellent support to young people in developing independence skills so that they are able to successfully move into independence. Foster carers assist young people to acquire age-appropriate independence skills and to develop practical skills for the home and in the community. They assist young people in money management and developing the emotional skills to cope with independent living. However, this is not fully supported by the agency as they do not provide written guidance or training for their foster carers in respect of providing effective support and guidance to young people preparing to move into independent or semi independent living.

The agency makes timely payments to foster carers, which are above that of the government guidelines. However, the agency does not provide clear guidance to foster carers as to how this should be spent.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Hope Fostering is a newly developed agency. It is organised and managed in a way that young people's needs are central to the work undertaken by the agency.

The agency has a detailed Statement of Purpose, which reflects the service's ethos and practices. Young people are provided with a Children's Guide, which provides useful information as to what to expect when in foster care. However, policies and procedures do not always reflect the current legislation or the role of an agency rather than a local authority. This has the potential of confusing foster carers regarding the agency's roles and functions.

The agency has a Registered Manager, a part-time manager, who has a wide range of experience within the fostering sector, an experienced senior practitioner and an administrative assistant.

In light of the need to maximise efficiency in such a small agency there has been some fluidity in the roles, with the structure adapting to the needs of a growing agency. However, there is no robust structure in place to monitor the effectiveness of the agency, although the Registered Manager has commenced the development of questionnaires to seek the views of young people, foster carers, and placing social workers in respect of their experience of the agency. Staff receive supervision from a suitably qualified and experienced senior person in the agency. Supervision addresses issues of practice and professional development. The social work and administrative staff are competent and knowledgeable in their field of practice.

The agency seeks to recruit a range of foster carers from different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures to reflect the local community; this enables the agency to make racially and culturally appropriate placements. The agency currently has nine approved foster carers and three young people have been placed with agency foster carers in the last three months. Two placements were short term and the third is still ongoing. In all three placements the outcomes for young people have been excellent.

The agency has used independent assessors to undertake the assessment of prospective foster carers. Whilst the assessors are experienced, the quality of the assessments has not always been satisfactory, with many showing a lack of robust analysis of the information obtained during the assessment. The agency is aware of this and has taken action to address this issue; this ensures that only thorough assessment reports are presented to the fostering panel.

Hope Fostering has a clear strategy for supporting foster carers and carers commented positively about the support they receive from the service. Foster carers are clear about the fostering service's expectation of them and of the support they will receive, as this is identified in the Foster Care Agreement. However, the Agreement does not accurately reflect the role of the agency and does not include all elements required.

Excellent support is offered to foster carers by the agency, with regular contact and supervision for all foster carers. In light of the recent nature of the three placements, no unannounced visits have been undertaken. Foster carers are encouraged to attend support groups to enable them to meet with other foster carers and the staff to discuss issues of practice. Foster carers are provided with a detailed foster care handbook and receive excellent pre-approval training to prepare them for providing placements to young people. There is a planned programme of post-approval training.

Foster carer's and young people's files were well organised and accurately reflected the work undertaken by the agency and its foster carers. The agency has not developed its own foster placement agreement and relies on documentation from placing authorities. This results in essential information not always being available for foster carers. This reduces the integrity of the record which describes why a young person has been placed with a particular foster carer and the purpose, roles and responsibilities in relation to the placement. This has the potential to conflict with the overall care plan for a young person or compromise the standard of care offered.

The agency ensures that an up to date, comprehensive record is maintained for each foster carer and young person. Supervising social workers and foster carers are aware that the maintenance of good records forms a safe and complete record for young people of their time in the 'looked after' system. They also understand that good information assists good, informed

decision making about the young people while they are looked after. All information both within the office and foster carer's homes is stored securely. The agency maintains a register of foster carers and young people.

The agency's promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency endeavours that its foster carers, staff and fostering panel all reflect the diverse nature of Nottingham's population, thus ensuring that there are appropriate placements for young people.

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
12	ensure that the arrangements for giving consent for the child's medical or dental examination or treatment is clearly recorded, including who the consent is delegated to (NMS 17 (3b))	1 April 2009
15	ensure that all staff are fit to work for the agency, with specific reference to all matters in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20 (3))	1 April 2009
8	make placements only when the foster carer's terms of approval are consistent with the proposed placement (Regulation 34 (1))	1 April 2009
14	provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as necessary, with particular reference to enabling them to provide effective support and guidance to young people preparing to move into independent or semi independent living (Regulation 17 (1))	1 June 2009
4	establish and maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 at appropriate intervals, so that the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency continually improves (Regulation 42 (1))	1 May 2009
22	ensure that all foster carers have an up to date foster care agreement which includes all the matters as set out in Schedule 5 (Regulation 28(5)(b))	1 May 2009
24	ensure, that before making a placement, the responsible authority enters into a written agreement (in these regulations referred to as the "foster placement agreement") with the foster parent relating to the child, which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6. (Regulation 34 (3))	1 April 2009

Recommendations

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

- make telephone enquiries as well as obtaining written references (NMS 15.3)
- ensure that the home and immediate environment are free of avoidable hazards that might expose a child to risk of injury or harm, by accurately completing the agency's health and safety check form for every foster carer (NMS 6.6)
- ensure that all foster carer's safe care guidelines, take into consideration any known risk in relation to the young person placed and that it is cleared by the placing social worker (NMS 9.3)
- develop a written policy on fostering allowances (NMS 29.2)
- ensure that fostering service's policies, procedures and any written guidance to staff and carers accurately reflect the Statement of Purpose and refers to correct legislation (NMS 1.6)
- undertake occasional unannounced visits to foster carers, at least one annually. (NMS 22.6)