

Hope Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Date of last inspection	16/02/2009

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Hope Fostering is a privately owned, independent fostering agency based in Nottingham and provides placements for young people from local authorities from the East Midlands region. The agency undertakes assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide a wide range of placement types for children and young people. At the time of this inspection 25 fostering households are providing placements to 42 young people.

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 agency has a strong child focus and has maintained a continuing commitment to supporting carers well in promoting positive outcomes for the young people placed. Young people, foster carers and placing social workers are confident about the high standard of care that young people receive in stable and supportive placements. Young people are happy in their placements, feel safe and are achieving well. Foster carers feel well trained and supported in providing this care. Commissioning officers and placing social workers speak of positive relationships with the agency, which promote young people's positive progress across all aspects of their welfare and physical, emotional and behavioural development.

Leadership and management have lacked strength and their systems have been insufficiently robust for monitoring the effectiveness of service delivery, or for demonstrating the quality of care provided. This has allowed a significant number of practice shortfalls and inconsistencies to develop. There has been inconsistency in the completion of form F assessments, with many showing poor analysis of the information presented, and neither assessments nor foster carer annual reviews have been completed in a timely manner. There is insufficient demonstration that carer approval status is fully reflective of their skill level or of the household's physical capacity to accommodate foster placements. The agency has not been sufficiently robust in ensuring that placing authorities always provide a current care plan for every young person placed. There has been a lack of robustness in demonstrating

consideration of the potential risks associated with making any placement, and particularly of the potential risks associated with bedroom sharing.

The agency has recognised for itself, prior to this inspection, the need to strengthen leadership and management and to develop sound quality assurance practices and systems to consistently evaluate and improve how outcomes for young people are positively promoted. The agency has sought input from a management consultant and has devised a clear and comprehensive development plan, with realistic timescales for implementation. The development plan covers all aspects of recruitment, assessment and supervision of carers as well as agency policies, procedures and systems for data collection and quality assurance monitoring. Operational and strategic management have been split and separately delegated to promote a real focus on improved practice in both areas. Strong partnership working is evident between the registered manager, who is undertaking an operational management role, and the designated strategic manager, who is developing robust monitoring and data collection systems and quality assurance tools. Whilst there is a clear demonstration that the agency is meeting the timescales identified in the plan, the changes, some of which have already taken place, are very recent and their impact on agency practice is only just beginning to be evidenced. Some of the stated improvement plan objectives are still to be fulfilled.

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
17 (2011)	ensure that every carer is provided with a copy of the most recent care plan for each child placed, as provided to the agency in accordance with regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations (regulation 17 (3))	31/08/2012
28 (2011)	ensure that first annual review of foster carers always take place within the required timescale and are presented to the fostering panel in a timely way (regulation 28(2); 28(5))	31/08/2012
35 (2011)	demonstrate monitoring by the registered person, of the matters set out in Schedule 6 by the production of a written report, which must be provided to Ofsted (regulation 35)	31/08/2012
36 (2011)	ensure that Ofsted is notified of all events listed as requiring notification under Schedule 7 (regulation 36(1))	31/08/2012
18 (2011)	include contact information for Ofsted, and details of how complaints can be referred to Ofsted, into the agency's complaints procedure (regulation 18(3))	31/08/2012
27 (2011)	incorporate details of the agency complaints procedure into the Foster Carer Agreement. (regulation 27(5)(b))	31/08/2012

Recommendations

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

- review the approval status of all foster carers to fully reflect on the appropriateness of current individual terms of approval and to demonstrate that foster carers' approval status truly reflects the number and range of young people that the foster home can comfortably accommodate (NMS 10.1; 13.8)
- Retain a written record of the decision making process and outcome of the assessment in relation to agreement for young people to share a bedroom. Records must demonstrate that decision making has taken account of any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts (NMS 10.6)
- ensure that foster carer assessments are presented to the fostering panel in a timely way to allow the panel to make its recommendation on the suitability of prospective carers within 8 months of receipt of the carer's application (NMS 14.4)
- ensure that all foster carers are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care within the required timescale (NMS 20.3)
- complete written risk assessments to demonstrate that the potential safety of all members of the fostering household is fully considered when a new child is placed, particularly where there are known concerning behaviours (NMS 4.1; 15.1)
- ensure that the written records clearly distinguish between incidents, allegations, complaints and serious concerns about the service (NMS 25.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

More than half of the young people currently in foster placements with Hope have contributed their views during this inspection. All are extremely positive about their relationships with their foster carers and about the care they receive. Most speak proudly of the positive progress they have made in these placements and of the real support their foster carers have provided to enable them to do this: 'She's the best. I wouldn't be where I am without her'; 'I really feel like I belong here'.

The agency operates a consultation group for looked after children and a support group for carers' own children. The agency has secured the young people's views on what constitutes a good foster carer, and on how young people can be helped to feel welcome in the foster home, and uses these in its pre-approval training for carers.

This ensures that what young people see as important about the fostering role forms an essential part of foster carer development. The overwhelming majority of young people, who completed questionnaires, are confident that their carers always listen to their views and they really feel part of the family: 'My foster carers are the best, they make me feel safe and protected, they take us dancing most nights and I feel like X is my sister and she is a good role model for me'. Young people say that their carers always go with them to their reviews and meetings and help them to say what they want to say. Hope sends out annual questionnaires to get young people's views about the service and obtains their views on their placement before their foster carer annual review. This enables young people's views to influence the progress of their own placements and service development generally. The agency's supervising social workers have sound knowledge of all the young people placed, regularly speak to them when they visit carer households and operate the consultation groups. Discussion with staff, carers and young people demonstrates that this agency has a strong child-focussed approach.

Young people are being supported to compile profile books to record the progress they have made during placement. Several young people have already completed these. They contain photographs of the young people engaged in various activities with their foster family and copies of certificates, school reports and awards obtained. As young people move out of the care system these provide them with a really good record of their time in foster care.

Most young people have extremely stable placements which are robustly promoting educational attendance and achievement. Many young people have obtained certificates for 100% attendance, one said: 'My carers make sure I do my homework and go to school every day. Living here has made me behave and not get into fights or trouble'; Young people's school reports detail the excellent progress they have made. Young people speak proudly of the hobbies and interests which their foster carers have supported them to engage with, and of the certificates and trophies they have won. Several young people have achieved awards through the Duke of Edinburgh scheme; some have excelled at dancing; whilst others have become good at horse riding and swimming. Some young people have represented the county in cricket and table tennis. 'I do a lot of activities now that I didn't do before, like cricket and basketball, and now I can swim too'. All young people speak very positively about the activity days organised by Hope. In fact several think 'that's what Hope is the very best at'. There has been a Christmas party, a book festival, a celebratory meal for Eid and trips to the zoo and leisure parks. These social events provide additional opportunities for young people to talk together and with agency staff.

There are good examples of young people, with specific health care needs, making significant improvements thanks to the dedication of their carers in pursuing proper diagnosis of conditions and supporting access to regular specialist intervention. Young people feel healthier: 'I do plenty of sports and eat healthily. I brush my teeth every day now and even have showers'; 'I was overweight, greasy and didn't care and look how girly I am now'.

The overwhelming majority of young people completing questionnaires are confident that their specific needs, in relation particularly to religious beliefs and culture, are recognised and supported by their carers. The agency has provided a number of placements to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. Some of these placements have been particularly positive, with carers supporting young people to establish cultural links locally and to make some very positive educational achievements. Some of these young people are exceptionally proud of their achievements: 'I could not speak any English when I arrived and now here I am doing A levels'.

There is an instance where concerns raised in respect of foster carer's practice have not been addressed by the agency in a timely and robust manner. Delays in properly addressing these concerns impacted adversely on outcomes for young people in placement at that time.

Quality of service

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

At the time of the previous inspection the agency had a particular focus on the placement of young people from black and minority ethnic groups and had recruited foster carers accordingly. As the nature of placement referrals from local authorities, has altered Hope has tailored its carer recruitment to meet identified placement needs. The agency has a clear carer recruitment strategy in place, which is properly funded, and has recently received a number of new applications to foster. The agency now has carers of varying ages and from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. There is a slight disparity in numbers, between the ethnic background of the agency's carers and that of the young people currently placed. Where the agency makes transracial placements, careful consideration is given to the foster carer's capacity to meet young people's identified individual needs, and to providing any additional support the carer may need to support the placement. Placing social workers say they are confident that equality and diversity are central to everything the agency does and that carers' capacity to meet young people's individual needs is well considered. There are good examples of young people being positively supported to attend religious services and to establish cultural links within the community. Where the agency identifies a shortfall in a carer's capacity to properly promote individual development there are occasions when they have imposed temporary placement restrictions whilst a clear carer development plan is implemented.

The agency has vastly improved its matching pro-forma, having recognised that the previous record provided a poor demonstration of the care taken in considering the skills of the foster carer to meet the needs of potential placements. The agency has developed individual carer profiles, which are shared with placing authorities, to reflect their particular skills and promote sound matching. Most of the foster carers who completed questionnaires feel that placements are well matched and the very small number of placement breakdowns supports this. Young people feel strongly that they are placed with the right foster carers, as do their placing social workers. A

placing social worker has recently nominated a Hope foster carer for the carer of the year award in recognition of the very positive placements she has provided for young people. Carers do however feel that, sometimes, background information about young people placed is not provided, by placing authorities, in a timely manner. The agency is not always robust enough in reminding local authorities of their legal responsibility to provide care plans, under the Care Planning and Placement Regulations, and this means that some foster carers do not have a copy of young people's current care plan to inform their work with those young people.

The current fostering panel was established a year ago. The independent chair has sound relevant background knowledge and experience to guide her leadership role. Panel membership reflects a good gender, age and ethnicity balance as well as a range of relevant knowledge and experience. This supports careful examination of carer assessments and robust questioning of potential applicants to ensure their suitability to become foster carers. Panel minutes are clear and comprehensive and panel recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker are supported by good reasons for the approval of potential applicants as foster carers. The panel exercises its quality assurance role well. A number of concerns have been raised regarding the quality of assessments, which are largely completed by independent assessors. This year the agency has taken positive steps to address this. New independent assessors have been recruited and a much more robust monitoring system has been instituted. The registered manager now operates as panel advisor and monitors the quality of assessments prior to these being presented to the panel. Shortfalls in respect of panel training, and in sharing information about agency practice and position regarding, for example, recruitment of carers with the panel, have also been proactively addressed. Panel members are now receiving regular supervision, agency updates and annual appraisals. The agency has also worked with the panel to develop a better understanding of how child protection issues, allegations and serious concerns are managed. These developments promote much improved joint working to ensure that foster carers recruited are of good quality and able to provide positive placements for young people.

The agency is currently receiving a significant number of referrals for sibling groups. A practice has developed of routinely approving foster carers for three placements without either the form F assessment or panel minutes reflecting full consideration of the bedroom accommodation available for the fostering task. The agency renews its Foster Care Agreement with each carer every year following the annual review. The agreement does not incorporate information about the complaints procedure.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

All young people consulted during the inspection say that they feel safe and well cared for in their placements. Carers and staff receive safeguarding training to equip them to manage any disclosures or child protection concerns competently and confidently. An overwhelming majority of carers completing questionnaires say that

the agency training, and support from their supervising social workers, has made them feel confident to recognise and deal with child protection issues. Foster carers support young people well with contact arrangements, and are aware that there are sometimes potential concerns regarding young people's contact with some members of their families. Some carers are able to describe instances, for example a child relating that a parent had smacked them during contact, where they have contacted young people's social workers subsequent to contact visits to relay information, which gives them cause to be concerned for a young person's safety. This is a very positive practical application of their safeguarding training.

The agency's bedroom sharing policy does not fully accord with the National Minimum Standards, which detail that children over three should preferably have their own bedroom. Where bedroom sharing does occur, the agency is not always recording the completion of robust risk assessments. Similar shortfalls are evident in the failure to complete robust risk assessments in relation to new placements made in carer households where other young people are already placed. Especially where young people's histories reflect emotional and behavioural difficulties or sexualised behaviours, the lack of proper risk assessment has the potential to place young people at risk.

The agency has made appropriate contact with the Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding, when child protection concerns have arisen, though it has not always been confident enough in challenging advice it has considered not wholly appropriate. For example, a recent potential child protection referral was in fact categorised and investigated as a serious concern, even though the agency had reservations about this being an appropriate way forward. The placing authority involved is, however, fully satisfied that the investigation was thorough and that young people's safety and welfare was rightly prioritised.

Agency supervising social workers conduct an annual health and safety assessment of all fostering households to ensure that the environment is safe for young people to live in. An annual unannounced visit is made to each household to conduct a random check on the care and safety of the young people placed. Young people in placement are always interviewed as part of this visit so that they can comment on their care. All foster carers prepare a safe caring policy as part of their assessment and this general household policy is supplemented with individualised additions each time a new child is placed. Many young people have independent advocates appointed and this increases their safety by providing them with an independent adult, in whom they can confide. Young people very rarely go missing from their foster placements. Only one young person has done so in the last year. The agency has clear policies and procedures should this occur, and foster carers fully understand their responsibilities if a young person goes missing. Some young people have received good support to tackle bullying in school. Carers have liaised well with the school to ensure that such behaviour is robustly challenged as well as providing good support to the young people to manage their feelings.

Sometimes, where concerns have been raised regarding carer practice, they have not been followed through robustly enough. Although the agency has investigated the

specific concerns raised they have not always followed this through in robustly identifying potential carer training and support needs, evidenced by the raising of the concern. Neither has the agency considered the potential requirement to conduct an early annual review to consider the continuing appropriateness of the carer's approval status. This approach has meant that the carer's capacity to manage subsequent placements has not been enhanced. An unplanned placement ending has occurred because of this. The agency has learnt from this and has introduced much stronger systems for managing serious concerns and also for monitoring and, where appropriate, challenging carer practices.

Leadership and management

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

Monitoring practice has been insufficiently robust. The agency has recognised this, prior to this inspection and has instituted a comprehensive development plan to address areas of shortfall. There are good indications that the objectives of the development plan are being addressed positively and quickly.

The fostering service reflects a very child-centred approach and a large majority of young people benefit from stable placements, which promote their progressive development and positive achievements. The agency is ambitious for young people placed and this is reflected in its support to carers. Supervising social workers make weekly visits when young people are initially placed, or in times of crisis, and subsequently provide fortnightly supervision. Foster carers are well supported to access support and guidance from associated professionals for young people in their care, and to guide their own practice, such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. Foster carer support groups, facilitated by a supervising social worker, provide group support and carers say that informal support networks operate well to help them with specific issues too. Foster carer records, retained by the agency, are not always a good reflection of the work supervising social workers undertake to support their care of young people and to develop their practice. Management has lacked robustness and some inconsistencies have developed in carer supervision practices and in recording. In some instances relationships between social work staff and carers lost some of their professional focus, and there have been instances where concerns regarding carer practice have not been challenged robustly enough. Carer supervision was, for some time, recorded as part of the running log. There was no clear agenda or apparent focus to these sessions and the record was not shared with the carer. Whilst this was the case written records provide little evidence of how the agency was promoting the development of carer practice. There is now a separate pro-forma record, signed by the carer and supervising social worker. The agenda is clearer but some records still lack strong detail and are not fully reflective of the very strong, focussed support carers say they receive.

The agency's complaints procedure does not include contact information for Ofsted or details of how complaints can be referred to Ofsted, although all carers

demonstrate full awareness of Ofsted's role. Written records relating to allegations, serious concerns and complaints are insufficiently clear. Although there is a clear demonstration that action is always taken to address all of these, some are wrongly categorised and this means that subsequent investigations have not always followed the correct procedure. A recent incident has prompted the agency to fully recognise that its procedures and recording systems, in this area, lack clarity. The policies and procedures for managing allegations and concerns have been rewritten to provide for such incidents to be managed and recorded more robustly. Training is currently being delivered to staff, foster carers and panel members to ensure that they fully understand the agency's processes for managing allegations and serious concerns and the requirement to clearly differentiate between these. The agency is utilising discussion of specific cases to highlight areas where practice has been insufficiently robust and to identify what lessons have been learnt by the agency.

All requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection, in February 2009, have been implemented except for the establishment of a sound system for monitoring the matters set out under Schedule 6 of the regulations, and for forwarding reports of such monitoring to Ofsted. The agency has now devised a pro-forma recording tool for this purpose but has not yet completed a written report. Although the agency is retaining a full record of all incidents detailed under Schedule 7 of the regulations, not all of those requiring notification to Ofsted are being reported.

The agency Statement of Purpose has been reviewed and provides good information about the service provided. The website has been redesigned to provide current information about the service to prospective carers. The young people's guide is colourful and attractive and provides a wealth of useful information about what they can expect from their foster placement and contact information for support services they may wish to access.

There have been shortfalls in the quality of assessments and in the timescale for presenting assessments to the fostering panel to allow a recommendation on suitability to be made within eight months of a prospective foster carer's application to foster. This is now being addressed by better recruitment of independent assessors and more robust systems to monitor the quality and timeliness of their work. Foster carer reviews, particularly first reviews, have not always taken place in a timely manner. When first reviews of foster carers have been undertaken there has often been a three month delay before these have been presented to the fostering panel. The agency has now instituted a tracking system to ensure that all carer annual reviews are planned well in advance and, where appropriate, are scheduled for presentation to the fostering panel immediately.

Foster carers say that the training, provided by the agency helps them to develop skills to better support young people: 'The training we have received has been excellent and invaluable'; 'I enjoy the training Hope offers, the friendliness of the staff and meeting all the other carers to share experiences'. The agency provides a varied range of pre- and post-approval training including training on equality and diversity, managing challenging behaviour and attachment and loss. All training is

also open to staff and members of the fostering panel. This promotes shared experiences and skill development. Staff say that they have good access to external training to improve their skills. Supervising social workers have recently completed training on Form F assessments and on attachment. The panel chair has recently completed training for her role through the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. Some foster carers are not completing the Children's Workforce Development Council's Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care within the required timescale, even though the agency is operating workshops to support prompt completion.

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.