

Hope Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Ros Chapman
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Date of last inspection	16/07/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Hope Fostering is a privately owned, independent fostering agency based in Nottingham. It undertakes the recruitment, preparation, assessment, approval, supervision and training of foster carers, who provide a wide range of placements, including emergency, short term, long term and parent and child.

At the time of this inspection there were 25 fostering households, and 45 children and young people placed. Two fostering households had been approved in the year 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This is a good fostering agency which provides positive, safe placements for children and young people, some of whom have very complex needs. Its strengths include placement stability and longevity, which enable children and young people to have happy and stable lives. They have their needs fully met, develop positive attachments to their carers, and consequently, they achieve, in many cases, exceptional outcomes.

The agency values the children and young people and places a high premium in providing quality care. Their views are taken seriously and used to influence the service. Children and young people enjoy the social events, which are designed to reflect their interest and suggestions.

Foster carers provide excellent standards of care and demonstrate real insight into the needs of children, as a result of good training and regular support. A social worker said: 'The carers are fantastic; their commitment, love and stability have carried him through the wobbles.' They are valued as part of the team and work in partnership with other agencies, using their knowledge of the children and young people to enhance the support and services needed.

The agency has effective working relationships with partners, which provide both support and challenge to meet children's and young people's needs effectively.

The management of the agency has improved significantly since the last inspection. There is additional capacity in the management team, and there is a more systematic approach to addressing shortfalls and monitoring outcomes. This has resulted in improvements across the board. Staff and carers alike enjoy working for this agency, which they consider to be very child focused. They feel well supported and valued. One foster carer said: 'I am 100% happy with the support and I can't praise them enough.' A member of staff commented: 'I am proud to be part of this agency.'

Minor shortfalls identified as a result of this inspection do not have an impact on outcomes for children and young people. The managerial monitoring does not currently feed into a report which should be submitted to Ofsted. The children's guide requires some more information, and the record of the agency decision should reflect the decision-making process in more detail.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1). Regulation 35(2))	31/03/2016

Recommendations

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

ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet* and *IRM* (2009) and approach a case accordingly (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering

Services 5.40)

ensure the children's guide contains all the information required. (NMS 16.4)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

This area is judged outstanding because of the impact of placement stability and longevity, which significantly enhance children's and young people's experiences, progress and outcomes. Over 66% of the children and young people placed have lived with their foster carers for over two years in long-term placements. Although placements occasionally end in an unplanned way, the proportion of these, at less than 10%, is below the national average of 12% for independent fostering agencies. When carers have given notice on a placement, the agency insists that they respect the notice period, unless there is an exceptional reason not to do so, and carers will usually keep the child or young person for longer, pending a suitable move. Stakeholders have commented: 'The agency provides stable, long-term placements. The carers really hold on to them and stick with them through thick and thin.' This includes children who have had multiple placements prior to moving to the current carers. Some carers have adopted children placed with them, which the agency fully supports if it is in the best interests of the child. Carers also keep young people under 'staying put' arrangements. Such placement stability has a significant impact on emotional security and well-being and enables children and young people to make significant progress and have exceptional outcomes. One social worker said of a young person's placement: 'It's made a dramatic difference to his behaviour.'

Every effort is made to provide children and young people with information about foster families before they are placed. This works very effectively with planned placements and includes visits to carers prior to placement, and providing the carers' family book of information. This is currently being improved for emergency placements by developing child-friendly profiles which can be emailed out to social workers to share with the children and young people in advance.

Children and young people are extremely well cared for in stable, safe and happy placements that meet their needs. They are very well supported to maintain a positive identity. The agency provides placements for large sibling groups so brothers and sisters can stay together. Carers are really committed to promoting positive contact with family members and advocate on children's and young people's behalf if this is not happening as it should. Carers understand and are committed to meeting their cultural needs and facilitate the provision of appropriate food, attendance at places of worship and practicing their religion. When children move on to adoptive placements, carers demonstrate significant understanding of the need to provide a positive tangible reminder of their time in foster care, through memory boxes and photo albums. All this ensures that children and young people have an excellent understanding and appreciation of their identity, improved self-esteem and a positive sense of self.

Children and young people have a very positive experience of family life and are very much a part of the fostering family. They go on family holidays, take part in activities in the community such as football, swimming and cricket, and enjoy time with their friends. This includes sleepovers and holidays with friends. They know their carers

are committed to them and want the best for them and can see what a difference being fostered has made to their lives. One young person said: 'My life has been turned around because of my foster carers; they are miracle workers, amazing.' Another said: 'My foster carers have helped me a lot.' The agency also provides social events such as a Christmas party, fun days and an Eid celebration meal. This helps them feel valued and cared for by the agency as well as their carers.

All the children and young people have appropriate educational placements, and their attendance is excellent, with many achieving 100%. Those in long-term placements in particular are achieving above expectations, and there is evidence of some really outstanding progress, as they settle and are able to engage more. They start to have ambitions for themselves and their futures. A social worker commented that a child had come on 'in leaps and bounds' and 'done amazingly well'. One young person commented that his attendance 'had sky-rocketed' as a result of being in foster care. Carers are excellent advocates and attend all the relevant meetings, usually along with the supervising social worker.

Children and young people are healthy because carers support access to appropriate services and advocate to ensure these are provided as necessary. Carers say: 'We've got to fight for these kids.' There is a very good use of the child and adolescent mental health service. Stakeholders commented very positively about how carers use this support and advice and how the agency supports carers and engages proactively to provide additional services or guidance.

Children's and young people's views are valued. The agency canvasses these annually through a survey but there is a lot of additional consultation and participation, both formal and informal, through supervisory visits, social activities, and carer reviews. Young people have developed questions to be asked of potential carers at the fostering panel so they have an input into foster carer approval, based on their experiences. They know how to complain and have people to talk to if they are worried.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency offers placements to children and young people with complex needs, and it has also been able to accommodate sibling groups of five children. These placements are supported very well as demonstrated by the placement stability and positive outcomes.

The process for the preparation, assessment and approval of carers is thorough and timely. The preparation training provides a solid foundation to enable potential foster carers to understand the fostering task and their role within it. The assessments are analytical and focus on the competencies required to be a foster carer. Reviews take place on time and are completed by an independent social worker to ensure objectivity.

The fostering panel provides effective oversight of the work of agency. The central list comprises members with a really good range of experience and knowledge, both personal and professional. This ensures that they give a thorough consideration to all the issues. The administration of the panel is efficient and the minutes are of a good standard to reflect the discussions and enable the decision maker to make an informed and timely decision. However, the decision is not currently recorded in line with statutory guidance, although the process described is robust and child focused.

Matching is an area of strength, demonstrated by the longevity of placements and low rate of unplanned endings. Clear decision-making processes based on the needs of the child and the capacity of the carers are evident. The agency does its best to obtain information from local authorities and has developed a systematic approach to this which has proved to bring about some success. There is no pressure to place children for commercial reasons; it is a child-focused decision.

Foster carer training is an area of strength which supports effective placements. All carers have completed their training and development standards within the recommended timescales. Carers have access to an impressive range of training which they are encouraged to access in line with their annual personal development programme. It is of high quality and carers comment positively on how it has helped them improve their practice and how they have used it when caring for the children and young people.

Support and supervision are further areas of strength. Supervision is very regular and child focused. Carers value the opportunity to share their concerns and comment that their supervising social worker will challenge them if required. Carers feel really well supported. They comment that the out of hours service is quick to respond, as is the service they receive when the office is open.

Foster carers are clearly very committed to the children and young people, whatever the challenges, and see them as part of their family. They involve them in family occasions, holidays and treat them as their own. Carers respect and value the birth family and facilitate contact arrangements so that they sustain important relationships. Although carers can have 14 days respite a year, they do not always take this, but if required they are encouraged to use their back-up carers, who children and young people already know, so that it is seen as a positive experience.

Carers are universally positive about working for this agency. They like the fact that it is small and friendly, and say it feels like 'a professional family'. They know the staff, the staff know them and are responsive to any request for advice and support. A foster carer said: 'I love Hope. When I've had problems they have been very supportive. They are there for you whatever time. My support worker is brilliant.' They feel valued and part of the team. One foster carer commented: 'The agency has high expectations and helps us achieve them.'

The agency and the carers fully support reviews and other professional meetings, which enables informed decisions to be made in the interests of the children and young people placed. Delegated authority is clear and an area which is pursued where necessary.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Keeping children and young people safe and protecting them from harm is at the centre of the agency's practice, and as a result, the agency operates a safe service where children and young people flourish. Staff are well versed in all aspects of safeguarding, including child sexual exploitation, and are supported in this through comprehensive policies, procedures and training. The manager is in the process of sourcing training in radicalisation and extremism, although this has been addressed in other courses. Foster carers are also very aware of the signs of grooming, and the potential risks that vulnerabilities pose for people who want to exploit and abuse children and young people.

Children and young people feel safe in their foster homes and comment that their foster carers are the people they would go to if they had any concerns. They know their carers have their best interests at heart. One young person said: 'I would be on the streets now if it wasn't for them.' However, children and young people are also able to take age-appropriate risks, as carers recognise that they need to mature, develop and learn how to manage the world themselves. Risks are well assessed, documented and updated in the light of any changes. This, in conjunction with safe care plans, provides carers with up-to-date information about how to manage risks safely to minimise harm.

The children and young people currently in placement are not engaging in any risk-taking behaviour or going missing. This has happened previously, and both the carers and the agency managed this well, engaging the wider network to support the young person. Carers demonstrate a robust understanding of how to respond to such incidents, and are supported by regular training of a high quality. The agency has all the relevant protocols from the different local authorities to ensure they are acting appropriately and in line with the guidance.

When foster carers are subject to allegations, these are managed well. Carers have access to good independent support while the investigation takes place, and they are fully aware of what and why this has to happen. One local authority designated officer was very complimentary about the prompt and open communication and significant support to maintain the young person's placement. Another said of one incident: 'They handled the allegation really well. They came to the meeting with full information and a risk assessment. It made my job easier.'

The preparation, assessment, approval, training and support of foster carers are underpinned by safe practice. Appropriate checks and references are taken up, and the fostering panel is well attuned to safeguarding issues. Training ensures that foster carers understand the impact of abuse and neglect and how children and young people may manifest their responses to this. They are therefore able to manage their distress and behaviour more appropriately. There is at least one unannounced visit a year to each foster home, and children and young people are

seen alone. Children and young people therefore develop a relationship with the agency's supervising social workers, and this provides another avenue of support, should they wish to raise a concern. Further robustness to a safe service is added by the use of an experienced, knowledgeable independent social worker to carry out all foster carer reviews. This mitigates against the possibility of collusion and provides an additional tier of accountability.

Staff and panel members are recruited according to safe practice guidelines, to ensure that anyone working with children and young people or having access to their information, is suitable and safe to do so.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This agency has significantly improved since the last inspection. It has strengthened its managerial arrangements by appointing a team manager to support the registered manager. This additional capacity has resulted in a more systematic approach to the delivery and monitoring of the service.

Leaders and managers have established extremely positive and highly effective working relationships with all relevant partners. They meet regularly with commissioners to discuss their needs and provide feedback on services being delivered. Without exception, stakeholders comment on good communication and a prompt and proactive response to any issues. They express a high level of trust and confidence, and one stakeholder said: 'The agency goes above and beyond and works themselves to the bone to support placements.' This was echoed by a child's social worker who said: 'I can't fault the support; they went over and above to give extra support to the placement.' Another agency commented: 'I like their openness, commitment and contribution to the network and their proactive support to carers.' This results in improved outcomes for children and young people as placements are sustained.

Children's and young people's positive experiences are enhanced by the social events, consultation and the child-focused emphasis which underpins the agency's ethos. The agency has developed a good system for monitoring the impact of the service on children's and young people's outcomes, which highlights where there needs to be more focus, as well as where improvements have been made. This, together with the educational monitoring provides leaders and managers with good tracking systems to aid their monitoring.

Monitoring is further enhanced by an analysis of the annual surveys to children and their foster carers, and any issues highlighted are followed up. Leaders and managers, including the responsible individual, have regular management meetings that include regular consideration of the financial reports, to ensure they are fully apprised of all aspects of service delivery. This is an area which has improved, but although improvement is driven by the results of the monitoring, it has not yet resulted in a written report being sent to Ofsted as required.

There is a clear and child-focused statement of purpose which is accessible on the website, so that anyone can have information about what they can expect from the agency. There are two children's guides, to reflect the needs of different age groups. These are child-friendly documents; however, they do not contain all the information which would be helpful, such as how to contact their independent reviewing officer, access advocacy or the details of the children's commissioner.

The agency recognises that carer recruitment numbers are lower than it would like. It has developed a recruitment strategy based on research and there are signs that numbers are increasing this year. Retention of carers is generally good, so the agency has maintained carer numbers, despite low recruitment.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Staff feel very well supported by regular supervision and accessible managers. Supervision is regular and reflective and enables staff to consider case work decisions as well as their own personal development. Staff have access to external as well as internal training so they can offer a competent and effective service to foster carers and children. Staff are very positive about working for Hope Fostering and are proud to be a part of the agency. They feel valued and appreciated and comment that the values of the agency are put into practice, providing a child-focused service.

Notifiable events are completed, and acted upon promptly and appropriately, resulting in a safe and effective service. There were a number of requirements and recommendation from the last inspection. These have all been addressed and have resulted in the improvements identified in this inspection.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.