

Foster Care Solutions

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC413428
Inspection date	12/02/2015
Inspector	Stephen Smith
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	9b Lumley Court, Drum Industrial Estate, CHESTER LE STREET, County Durham, DH2 1AN
Telephone number	0191 4250095
Email	suemelia@fostercaresolutions.co.uk
Registered person	Foster Care Solutions Limited
Registered manager	Susan Melia
Responsible individual	Nicholas Charles Barnsby
Date of last inspection	24/11/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster Care Solutions is an independent fostering agency which is part of a national company with a number of registered branches. The agency provides foster care services for children with a broad range of needs. Placements are available on a long-term, short-term and emergency basis and include the provision of parent and child fostering placements. At the time of the inspection the agency had around 33 children and young people living with 24 foster caring families. The agency's staff team comprises of the manager, three full time supervising social workers as well as administrative support staff.

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 service. The agency provides its foster carers with good levels of support. Carers, in turn, ensure that young people make good progress and enjoy a positive experience of foster care. The agency's social workers know young people well and this helps ensure they receive the support they need and are safe and well with their foster carers.

The agency is well managed. The agency has sufficient staff who are well supervised and have access to appropriate training. Monitoring of the service provided and the care delivered to the young people is effective. This monitoring takes into account

the views of and input from young people and their foster carer who are able to influence the agency's practice and development. The agency does not always receive full information from local authorities in a timely enough manner. In these cases the agency's work with local authorities to secure this information is not managed well enough so is not always effective. This means it does not always possess all the information about young people it should.

The agency operates a thorough assessment and approval process. However, assessments themselves and the agency's records of the assessment process do not clearly separate the first and second stages of the assessment process. This means it is not clearly identified at what point applicants would be able to access the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) or appeal if their application were to be refused. Once approved, foster carers are provided with good supervision, training and support.

Young people fostered by the agency are helped to make good progress. They are able to take part in a range of activities which help them to engage with other people, learn skills and develop relationships. Their health needs are met well so their health improves. Where contact with families is appropriate for young people, they receive good support to help ensure this is a positive experience for them. Young people's educational achievement is monitored and promoted and young people make good progress during their time with their carers.

Arrangements to help ensure young people's safety are good. Foster placements are well supervised and monitored and agency staff spend time getting to know and talking to the young people. Young people feel safe and are able to make progress in their foster placements. Where young people go missing or are absent without authority from their foster home the agency provides them with good levels of support. However, this is not reflected well enough in the agency's records which makes monitoring and reporting more difficult than it should be.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that records of the assessment process clearly show the separation of assessment activity under parts one and two of the assessment process (Statutory Guidance: Volume 4 para 5.29 as amended)
- ensure that all carers receive sufficient training on first aid (NMS 6.7)
- ensure that written records of situations where young people are missing or absent from their home without authority clearly show whether the child was missing or absent, any reasons given by the child for being absent, the action taken to support the young person and arrangements to ensure they are seen by an independent person (NMS 5.10)

- develop a process to escalate requests to the local authority for full documentation in respect of each young person placed to ensure that the agency has access to all required information. (NMS 31)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people fostered by the agency make good progress, achieve positive outcomes and have positive experiences during their time in foster care.

The agency works well with local authorities when placements are requested and made. The matching process is careful so as to ensure that the needs of young people can be met well by their prospective carers. This means that, wherever possible, young people experience planned moves to their new foster carers. Where this is not possible good information sharing and placement agreement meetings helps support placements and young people are supported to settle in to their new families.

Young people receive very high levels of support in their placements. They make secure attachments to their foster carers and are helped to develop positive friendships and relationships. This helps young people to experience stable family lives. The support provided also helps young people to make good progress. For example, one local authority social worker said of a fostered young person that their 'social abilities and school achievement have improved remarkably' during their time in foster care.'

The agency provides good support to help to maintain placements. It evaluates each placement ending to identify the reasons and, although some placements end on an unplanned basis, the agency makes strong efforts to prevent and learn from this.

The agency's young person's guide provides good information about being fostered and what to do if young people have concerns or worries. Young people have a say in the way the agency operates. They helped to develop the agency's two young people's guides and have produced a really helpful document for young people moving into a foster home for the first time called 'What do I want to know?' Young people's views are sought for the reviews of their foster carers.

Young people have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. They are supported by their carers and the agency to access any specialist health provision they may need and the agency and its carers advocates strongly on their behalf in situations where specialist support is not readily available. Consequently, young people's health improves during their time in foster care.

Foster carers and their supervising social workers work with placing authorities and schools to help ensure that young people receive the education they need. Foster carers work hard to maintain young people's schooling. They provide transport to

school, often over significant distances to prevent young people having to move school. They also work closely with teaching staff to ensure young people get the help they need. The agency and its carers place a high priority on young people's educational attainment. Achievement is supported, promoted and rewarded at celebration events. This work means that young people make good educational progress during their time living with their foster carers.

Young people are helped to maintain important family ties. Foster carers help young people to maintain contact with family members wherever this is assessed as appropriate. They work well with birth families where this is required and provide young people with good emotional support. Young people's lives are improved by their access to a range of leisure and recreational activities. These help them to develop their skills and to increase their self-esteem. They are fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's foster carer recruitment and assessment process is thorough, robust and rigorous. Enquirers are provided with good information about fostering and careful screening of enquirers takes place before applications are invited. The suitability checks, assessment and preparation training of prospective carers provide a clear evaluation of the applicant's suitability to foster. They are undertaken in a timely manner. This ensures that, when approved, foster carers are well prepared and have full information about what fostering entails and the challenges they will face.

However the agency's assessment reports and its record of the assessment process do not clearly show the separation of the two stages of the assessment process. For example it is not always clear at what point the checks undertaken under part one of the process were completed and when decisions were made to commence part two. This means that the point an applicant would be able to appeal or access the IRM should the agency not continue to consider their application is not clearly identified.

The agency's panel works effectively and provides a good scrutiny of the cases presented to it. Panel minutes provide the agency decision maker with a clear and well-judged recommendation along with the reasons for this recommendation. Panels held are quorate with minutes clearly recording who is present. Panel administrative processes are effective and the agency's central list comprises members with a variety of appropriate backgrounds and skills. Agency decisions are made promptly after the receipt of the finalised panel minutes.

The agency provides its foster carers with very good supervision which takes place on a monthly basis. This covers foster carers' support matters, the provision of care and the progress made by young people. This helps to ensure that young people are provided with high levels of support. The agency also provides its foster carers with a high level of support and guidance. Foster carers know their supervising social

workers well and have professional and trusting relationships with them. Out of hours support is effective and foster carers really appreciate the advice and support provided. For example, one foster carer said that the social workers 'are great and will always go the extra mile to help'.

The agency provides its foster carers with relevant training and development. The majority of carers have attained the Training, Support and Development Standards. Foster carers have individual development plans which help to identify their training needs. This helps ensure that carers undertake the training most relevant to their needs and those of the young person they foster. The agency has recently experienced some difficulty in providing first aid training for its carers. Consequently, some foster carers' first aid qualifications are now out of date which could impact on the care provided to their young people. The agency is working to address this by accessing alternative sources of this training

The agency manages foster carers' reviews in a very thorough manner. Reviews fully take into account the views of the young people in placement and their social workers as well as those of the foster carer and their agency worker. Thorough and comprehensive review meetings take place and highly detailed and evaluative reports provide a rigorous consideration of the foster carer's continued suitability to foster. This process is impressive in its thoroughness and helps ensure the continued high quality of the agency's team of foster carers.

Agency social workers meet young people regularly to ensure their needs are being met, to provide any support needed and to allow them to express their views. The agency supports foster carers to advocate for the young person in placement and to be a full part of the team working with the young person.

The agency works effectively with placing authorities to make and support good placements. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and, in situations where this is complex, the agency works hard to ensure that arrangements are clear to foster carers. This helps ensure that young people receive the care they need.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency works well with local authorities to match young people and foster carers so that young people are placed with families who can keep them safe and meet their needs. Foster carers look after young people in a way that promotes their safety but also allows them to take age appropriate risks. The agency and its carers develop good, individualised safe caring plans and clear risk assessments in respect of each young person placed with the agency. Young people's situations are monitored closely and plans and assessments are updated where necessary. Communication with local authority social workers are good which means that they are kept fully informed of all key events in the lives of the young person they are responsible for.

The agency's supervising social workers visit foster carers regularly and spend time with young people in placement. They know young people well and work to establish good relationships with them which enable young people to voice any concerns they may have. Unannounced visits to foster carers take place and foster carers' reviews monitor the frequency of these to ensure it is appropriate.

The agency works well with its carers to reduce the risk of young people going missing. Where young people do go missing or are absent from their foster home without authority, the agency and its foster carers respond to this appropriately. Communication with placing authorities is good and action is taken including work with the young person concerned to reduce the likelihood of recurrence. This is often very successful. For example, in the case of one young person who was regularly reported as missing from the foster home, joint working with the placing authority led to a change in the young person's plan of care. The young person has not gone missing since.

While work in individual cases with young people who go missing or absent themselves from their home is good, the recording of this is often not good enough. Records are often not clear as to whether the young person was absent without authority or actually missing and the reasons for young people absenting themselves from the home are not always clearly recorded. Additionally, records do not always show the arrangements for young people who have been missing to be seen by an independent person. This weakness in recording means that it is more difficult than it should be for the agency to monitor arrangements it puts in place to protect young people.

Safeguarding matters are a key priority throughout the agency's work. The assessment and approval process for foster carers is rigorous in checking the backgrounds of applicants. Recruitment processes for staff and members of the central list are similarly thorough. These arrangements to ensure the suitability of those people working with young people help keep young people safe.

The agency provides foster carers with both pre and post approval training about working with young people who may have been abused or who may be at additional risk of harm. Foster placements are monitored closely and foster carers' supervision and reviews monitor young people's safety and wellbeing. Where safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur, the agency responds to these promptly in line with the local authority's procedures to ensure that young people are safe.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs. It makes efforts to acquire full local authority documentation about children to help underpin the care provided to them. However, these efforts are not always successful and some young people do not have key

planning documentation on their files. This means that the agency cannot be sure that the care provided is fully in line with the local authority plan. Work to acquire outstanding information is not always as robust as it should be and the agency lacks a well-developed process for escalating this matter to more senior managers in the local authority where documentation is not received.

The agency's strong monitoring of placements and foster carers' supervision places a focus on ensuring that young people receive good care. This promotes young people's opportunities and helps them to make progress. The agency tracks young people's progress and rewards their achievement. Where young people are experiencing difficulties the agency works effectively with placing authorities and other services to arrange any additional support they might need. The agency monitors its recruitment and assessment processes to ensure it is able to recruit new foster carers with the appropriate skills and experience for the young people it may require placements for. Although the agency has seen a small reduction in the number of foster carers it has available it has a number of families currently undergoing the assessment process.

The agency has good administrative support arrangements in place. These help the agency operate in an effective manner. Social work staffing levels are appropriate for the size of the agency and social workers have access to good levels of training and support. Supervising social workers have appropriate workload levels. This means that they are able to work effectively with foster carers and spend time getting to know the young people and their views.

The agency's management seek the views of foster carers and young people, as key stakeholders in the service, about how it operates. Young people have helped design documentation used by the agency and a young person has helped to deliver some of the foster carers' preparation training. Foster carers' views are sought about how agency processes work and carers have taken part in interviews for new social work staff.

The agency is well managed at a strategic and operational level. The manager's monitoring of the agency's practice is effective and senior managers know the agency's strengths and any future developments planned. The agency has a well-developed and comprehensive development plan in place.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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, 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.