

Foster Care Solutions

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Michael McCleave
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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

Foster Care Solutions is an Independent Fostering Agency based in South Shields. It is part of a larger organisation known as Futures for Children. Foster Care Solutions has one manager and four social workers who support and supervise foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a well established fostering agency. The manager provides effective leadership to a small dedicated team of staff who are well trained. There are good administrative systems in place to provide support to the professional staff.

The health and care needs of the children placed in foster homes, are appropriately met by foster carers. All the children are registered with a medical practice and have access to dentists and opticians as required. There are excellent relationships established between the children and their foster carers. This is manifested in the stability of the placements based on a matching process that is very thorough and well planned. Children are actively supported by their foster carers to achieve their potential both socially and educationally. Where children have a disability, this is not seen as a limitation to their ability to achieve.

The agency positively promotes equality and diversity and will consider applicants to become foster carers irrespective of cultural, religious or sexual orientation. The key expectation of the agency, is the dedication and commitment of foster carers to provide children who are disadvantaged, with a loving stable home.

Foster carers are very well supported by the agency. There is a commitment to ensure that foster carers are trained to develop their skills in order to provide the best possible care for children. To assist this process, there is a flexible approach taken to support foster carers attend training events.

The agency makes good use of information technology that has reduced the need for paper records. Where such records are maintained however, the monitoring systems in place do not always ensure that these are updated. This means that some documents are not accurate although this does not impact directly on the care of the children.

Improvements since the last inspection

Not applicable. This is the first inspection since registration.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency works well to ensure the children who are placed with foster carers have very good access to health care resources. There is a clear expectation that children will have all their health care needs met and any resources required provided. The agency support workers along with the children's social workers, liaise effectively in order to provide foster carers with the appropriate health information for each child. The children are all registered with a local doctor and other health professionals as required. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities for monitoring the health needs of the children and ensure that the agency and placing social workers are kept fully informed of any concerns or treatment required. There is a good partnership arrangement between the foster carers, social workers and the fostering agency. Where required foster carers are able to obtain advice and guidance on any health related issues or concerns from health professionals. The children adopt healthy lifestyles and participate in physical and sporting activities, walks on the beach and in the countryside. Some foster carers have allotments and children grow their own vegetables. The overall health of the children is positively promoted by foster carers.

Children live in foster homes that are well maintained and provide good quality living accommodation. Foster carers understand the agency's policy in respect of health and safety and are assessed annually to ensure that children continue to live in a safe environment.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency takes its safeguarding responsibilities seriously. All staff and foster carers are required to undertake mandatory training in safeguarding. This ensures that children are monitored and cared for by adults who have a clear understanding of child protection and the actions to take should there be any concerns or suspicions of abuse. The training provided by the agency, equips the foster carers with the competence and skills, to enable them to effectively care for children who may have experienced abuse prior to their placement. Children feel safe living with their foster carers and those children of sufficient understanding know how to protect themselves. It is a strength of the agency that the calibre of foster carers is high with adults who have an excellent understanding of their fostering responsibilities.

The agency works in partnership with the appropriate safeguarding services to manage any child protection matter. This ensures that information on safeguarding matters, advice and guidance is readily available as required. This promotes the safety of the children. Foster carers are clear about the actions to take should a child go missing. The agency operates a 24 hour telephone contact service for foster carers where support and guidance is provided in addition to that from the statutory agencies.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The children are cared for by foster carers who actively support and encourage them to enjoy life and to aim high in their aspirations. The agency works positively to ensure that foster carers value diversity. Children are cared for by foster carers who demonstrate an appreciation of different cultures, race, religion and disability. The aim being to promote the potential of all children through a stable and caring home environment.

The children are positively encouraged by their foster carers to pursue leisure interests. This helps the children to develop skills and improve their self-confidence. Foster carers support active outdoor pursuits which are enjoyed by the children. There is a clear understanding by foster carers of the kinds of activities that can be pursued, taking into account health and safety considerations. The agency supports foster carers to involve the children in normal family activities and to take reasonable risks associated with family life. Of particular note are the fun events organised by the agency for the carers, foster children and birth children throughout the year. These include bowling, bicycling, football, swimming, sports days and going to the annual Christmas pantomime.

A strong feature of this service, is the positive support provided for children to achieve their potential, individually and at school. The educational aspirations of the children are actively supported by foster carers. This has resulted, in some children showing a marked improvement in school attendance and demonstrating excellent academic progress, from a previous low starting point. Foster carers take their responsibilities seriously and are fully engaged with the school attended by their foster children. Foster carers act proactively on behalf of their children to ensure that they have the same life chances as other children. One young person commented, 'My carers are fantastic they treat me as one of their own family.' A number of children who previously had a low self-esteem and confidence have blossomed with their foster carers. The agency holds an annual Christmas awards event to reward those young people who have demonstrated an achievement in a particular area personal to themselves. One young person was awarded student of the year by their college. The agency works with the education service to provide children who are not attending school with individually tailored education packages.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency welcomes and values the views of foster carers and children to service development. There is an open culture whereby foster carers and children can express their views through a computer link between the agency and each foster home. Children are encouraged by the agency to comment on their placement through the outcomes monitoring form. Foster carers feel they have been kept very well informed about changes to the organisation following the purchase of the

business by the new owner. The children are able to express their views about their placements through an on line system prior to their statutory reviews. The children's guide contains information of other adults who can be contacted if required. However, the guide is outdated and requires amending. The manager recognises the shortfalls and a new guide is in process of being developed by the organisation. Information provided to children prior to their placement is also acknowledged as an area for development.

Children are supported by their foster carers in having contact with their birth families. Some contact arrangements involve considerable travel commitments for foster carers. These can be emotionally challenging situations and foster carers are trained to manage these situations with sensitivity.

The foster carers are very proactive in their commitment to ensuring that the children make a positive input into family life and to feel very much a part of normal family decision making. This is something most of the children will not have previously experienced. Through the care and commitment of foster carers the children are given the opportunity to share in the life of the foster family and to be a valued member of the family unit.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The agency works well with foster carers to ensure that they are fully prepared for the time when plans are made for a young person to move towards independence. This can be an emotionally demanding time and the role of the foster carer is critical to the success of any transitions process. The agency's foster carers are clear about their responsibilities to support young people to prepare for independence. This involves advising and guiding them on personal relationships, preparing for the demands of work or higher education, looking after their own accommodation, budgeting, domestic skills and taking care of the health. Foster carers take an active role in contributing to the development of the evolving transition plan. They will challenge the professionals if there are any aspects of the plan they or the young person is unhappy with. This demonstrates a positive commitment to the care and welfare of the young people concerned. It also means that young people are actively supported to be in control of their future plans.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Foster carers are selected from a wide variety of social backgrounds. They are chosen for their commitment towards children and young people who need a safe caring and stable home environment. All foster carers receive mandatory training in equality and diversity as part of their preparation. There is a strong emphasis on caring for children where race, disability, religion, gender are not the primary focus, but rather as a part of the overall care

needs of the child. Where required, the agency will provide appropriate facilities to support children who have health concerns and physical impairments. The agency has achieved a formal accreditation in equality and diversity. Although foster carers from ethnic minority communities are under represented, the agency is firmly committed to having a diverse range of carers.

The agency is now part of a larger national organisation and the manager and staff have been coming to terms with the changes brought about by the reorganisation.

The agency maintains a team of foster carers who are appropriately trained and equipped with the skills to provide a safe and caring homely environment for children. The selection process for applicants to become foster carers is robust. They find the process to be daunting but very professionally carried out by staff. The training for foster carers is thorough and prepares them well for the challenges of fostering.

The fostering panel is properly constituted from a central list of people who are suitably experienced to undertake the demands of the panel process. Legal and medical advice is available to support the panel in complex decisions. The panel members are very clear about their important quality assurance role. This enables the panel to make appropriate recommendations to the agency decision maker. The review of the performance of the panel chair has not until recently been taking place. This has been addressed by the new organisation and a revised system of annual appraisal is now in place. The administrative support to the panel is efficient, ensuring that all reports are received by panel members within the timescales before the panel meets. Applicants to become foster carers are always invited to attend the panel and are given the opportunity to present their views on the process. Applicants are informed orally of the panel recommendation immediately after panel has concluded discussion of their case.

The matching process is conducted with care and sensitivity. The manager has identified a shortfall involving the amount of information given to children during matching as not being sufficient. This is being addressed and an improved information pack is being developed. Foster carers are treated as equal professionals with the support of the fostering agency. Any shortfalls in resources identified during the matching process are dealt with before the placement is made. These measures promote the stability of placements and improve chances of a good placement being established. The agency social workers demonstrate a professional approach to their work ensuring that children are placed with carers who are best suited to meet their needs.

Foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and they understand the aims and objectives outlined in the agency's Statement of Purpose. The children's guide is appropriately designed in a child friendly format however, it contains information that is out of date. A revised guide is currently being formulated to bring it in line with the new organisation's format. The manager is experienced in fostering services. The social work team comprises of four staff who are qualified and experienced social workers. The manager provides effective day-to-day oversight of the service and

undertakes professional supervision of the staff. The agency is well organised, managed and staffed, in a manner that delivers good outcomes for the children who are fostered. The agency is now a part of a wider fostering organisation that it is financially sound.

The staff of the agency, and those from the central list, are recruited and appointed following suitability checks and clearances. These include enhanced checks with the Criminal Records Bureau, telephone verification checks with gaps in employment identified. The safeguarding of children is at the forefront of the recruitment process.

The training of new foster carers is good. On initial application a member of the agency will visit and complete an initial assessment to test the suitability of the applicants. Once approved to proceed, all applicants are enrolled on a skills to foster training programme. There are good opportunities for foster carers to develop their skills through regular training events held throughout the year. All foster carers have a training record identifying training completed. The annual reviews of each foster carer considers the personal development of individual foster carers and their training needs. The agency adopts a user friendly flexible approach to training of foster carers. These events are scheduled to suit the working and family commitments of the foster carers. These take place on weekends and during evenings. This demonstrates a commitment to providing training within a framework of equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory practice.

Foster carers are very well supported by the agency, and they are able to access advice and guidance as necessary, to ensure consistent high quality care is provided for the children. Although allocated a supervising social worker, they can make contact with any member of the agency for assistance. The social worker is responsible for maintaining appropriate contact with foster carers and to monitor their continuing competence and performance. One foster carer stated, 'My supervising social worker is fantastic and is a great support for me if I have any problems to sort out with the local authority.'

Foster carers have a clear understanding of their safeguarding responsibilities and know how to refer any issues or concerns to the agency. The policy is clear about the procedure to follow, and appropriate supporting mechanisms are available for staff or foster carers who are subject to a safeguarding enquiry.

Staff are appropriately supervised by the manager to ensure that high quality standards of work are maintained. Staff have access to a training programme and they are expected to continually improve their skills and there is a positive approach to staff development. All staff including the manager receive formal monthly supervision. This is to ensure that high professional standards are maintained.

The agency is appropriately managed and there are effective procedures in place for monitoring and controlling the operations of the service. The manager monitors all records to ensure compliance with policies and procedures. Any shortfalls in standards are identified and action can be initiated to address any issues. The management board of the agency are kept up-to-date on the operation of the service

through the agency manager. All policies and procedures of the agency are currently being reviewed to bring these in line for the whole organisation to ensure consistency in practice and performance.

Records are well maintained and these are kept in a secure office. However, some records require updating to ensure their accuracy. Not all foster carers are aware of their responsibilities in respect of confidentiality and the security of records they keep in their home. This could compromise the confidentiality of records relating to children.

The agency office is well equipped. Each social worker has individual access to a computer. This is an efficient service with good administrative systems to ensure smooth operations are maintained to support staff and foster carers. The agency pays above the national minimum rates for foster carers. This indicates the value placed by the agency on the calibre of its foster carers.

There is a notifications system in place whereby significant events affecting a foster child or the placement are notified to the appropriate authorities. This ensures that appropriate action is taken to protect the children.

The agency works closely with its foster carers and encourages them to play an active role in the children's care plan. Copies of the plan are always given to foster carers who are encouraged to contribute their views as to the effectiveness of the plan. Foster carers are trusted partners in the care of the children and they take an active part in their statutory reviews. This is a good demonstration of the positive contribution made by foster carers to the care of the children.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Recommendations

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

- ensure the performance of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.15)
- ensure that fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files. There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)