

Fostering Solutions Limited South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Collett
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering Solutions Limited South is a regional office of Fostering Solutions, a national independent fostering agency operating across the United Kingdom. The service recruits, trains and supports carers who provide emergency, short-break and long-term foster placements for a range of children and young people. Specialist placements are provided for brother and sister groups, disabled young people, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and parents with new-born babies. The service offers short- and long-term placements. There are approximately 217 approved foster carers, in 120 households, who can offer up to 287 placements.

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: **Outstanding**

The care and support that children and young people receive through the agency is exceptional. Staff provide foster carers with the guidance and support they need to make a positive difference to the lives of vulnerable, often traumatised, children and young people. A social worker described the care being delivered as 'amazing', adding that 'the carers just get her, and fully understand her needs'. This generally results in children and young people making excellent progress. One child has learned to read and write, despite assumptions that a learning disability would make this unlikely, prior to the placement being made.

Leaders and managers are ambitious for the children and young people placed. They encourage and inspire staff to adopt innovative ways of working. Consequently, staff have the confidence to introduce creative practice, particularly when it comes to assessing potential new carers. Such techniques have enabled staff to explore and evaluate an applicant's value base, and the likely impact that a child looked after will have on birth children. This has resulted in new interventions being delivered, such as workshops for birth children to provide them with a greater understanding of attachment issues. This, in turn, contributes towards the stability of placements.

The agency is committed to delivering high-quality services that take into account the needs of placing authorities. Leaders and managers have identified the need to develop a specialised service for children looked after who are ready to leave residential care. A small group of foster carers have received specific training to care for these young people, and arrangements are in place to meet the carers' support needs. This development will ensure that placing authorities have more available options for meeting the complex needs of this particular group.

Effective monitoring and evaluation processes enable the agency to identify what is working well and where there are areas for development. There is a strong commitment from leaders and managers to learn from any mistakes or shortfalls in good practice. Action plans are developed to ensure improvement where needed, and these are robustly monitored.

Protecting children from harm and promoting their well-being are central to the practice of staff and foster carers. Although some minor areas for development were identified in relation to safeguarding children and young people, the issues had not placed any child or young person at risk of harm. Leaders and managers demonstrate a positive approach to regulatory inspection and view it as an opportunity to learn and secure continuous improvement in the services delivered.

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 within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Arrangements for the protection of children 12 (1) The fostering service provider must implement a written policy which gives consideration to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. Specifically, to ensure that investigations into allegations made against foster carers consistently analyse the information obtained, identify training needs and the actions to be taken (Regulation 12 (1) (3)(e)).	6 May 2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations. To ensure that:

support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. In particular, to ensure that new foster carers receive training on child sexual exploitation, internet safety and missing from care. (NMS 20.8).

the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. Specifically, that children's and young people's individual risk assessments are regularly updated, particularly following a significant event. (NMS 4.5).

the fostering service's procedure is in line with Government guidance and requirements, including the duty to refer information to statutory bodies. Specifically, that relevant information is shared with the Disclosure and Barring Service when appropriate. (NMS 22.2).

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The vast majority of children and young people looked after through the agency enjoy positive life experiences and make significant progress across all aspects of their lives. On the rare occasions when children's and young people's needs are not being met, the gaps are identified quickly and robust action is taken to improve the quality of care that they receive. Agency staff work in partnership with external agencies to ensure the early resolution of any such difficulties.

Children and young people receive sufficient information about their prospective foster carers prior to placement admission. Effective procedures and well-planned admissions assist them to settle quickly, and foster carers work effectively to allay any anxieties the child or young person may have. Overall, children and young people receive a very high standard of care, delivered in accordance with their care plans. Over time, they develop increasingly secure attachments to their foster carers, and become fully integrated into family life. One young person said, 'I'm really happy here... it's my home.'

The sense of security that children and young people develop enables them to begin to come to terms with past negative experiences. The agency works in partnership with placing authorities to ensure that children and young people receive appropriate psychological support to address the impact of past trauma. In addition, a consultant child psychotherapist is available to advise foster carers on how to promote children's and young people's emotional well-being. As children's and young people's sense of stability and security increases, they begin to make significant developmental progress. A social worker reported that the clear and consistent boundaries provided by the foster carers had, 'enabled the child to begin taking responsibility for her own behaviour.'

Despite the overall improvement that children and young people make in terms of their behaviour, some inevitably continue to display high-risk behaviours which put them at risk of harm. When this occurs, foster carers are supported by their supervising social worker to secure multi-agency support. A foster carer stated that her supervising social worker, 'totally understands the needs of the young person, and is pushing to get the local authority social worker more involved'.

Educational achievement is prioritised. Foster carers establish positive links with teaching staff, and work in partnership to support children and young people to maintain their educational placements. Children and young people spoken to during the inspection stated that their foster carers encourage them to complete homework and assist them, if necessary. This pro-active approach has ensured positive outcomes for children and young people looked after by the agency. Independent research carried out for the agency confirms that 79% of children looked after by the agency for more than one year achieve Level 4 at Key Stage 2 in maths and science.

A culture of listening to children and young people, and taking their views into account, is embedded throughout the agency. They are encouraged to play an active role in the care planning process where appropriate, and there are excellent opportunities for them to influence how the agency develops policy and practice. A well-established youth council has contributed to practice development in areas such as preparation for placement and the young people's guide. Members of the council confirmed that their views are taken seriously and have resulted in changes being made. The council has taken an active role in commissioning an independent organisation to deliver a workshop to provide young people with information about leaving care. This will further enhance the work undertaken by foster carers to develop young people's independent living skills.

Foster carers understand the importance of promoting a healthy lifestyle. Children and young people are supported to attend after-school clubs and local community leisure facilities, providing them with opportunities to take exercise, build friendships and increase their self-esteem. As they grow and develop, they learn practical skills such as cooking and preparing a healthy, balanced meal. The agency ensures that foster carers receive relevant training and practical support when they are caring for children and young people with complex medical needs.

The agency is committed to delivering high standards of care for children and young people in secure, stable, foster placements where they can successfully develop into mature adults. Managers and staff take a pro-active approach to securing permanency for all children and young people. They have worked in partnership with placing authorities to ensure that those approaching 18 years can remain in their foster homes under the 'staying put' initiative.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Strong emphasis is placed on recruiting foster carers who are able to meet the needs of the local looked after population. Restructuring of roles within the agency has resulted in recruitment and assessment social workers specialising in this area of practice. These staff are familiar with the placing authority's priorities, and therefore focus their efforts on recruiting, assessing and preparing carers who can fulfil specific roles. These include taking parent and child placements or providing long-term care for primary school-aged children.

The move to having staff who specialise in the assessment and preparation of carers has resulted in higher quality assessments and greater consistency in this area of practice. Potential foster carers undergoing assessment receive excellent support,

including access to a 'buddy' who is an experienced foster carer. This helps them to prepare for the role they will undertake if they are approved by the agency. Mentoring ensures that new carers have a thorough understanding of the roles that professionals and agencies play in the lives of children looked after. A newly approved foster carer stated that her recruitment and assessment social worker 'put my mind at ease, filled me with confidence and ensured that I was well prepared for the role.' Potential foster carers undergoing assessment receive good-quality training as part of the preparation process. However, some relevant aspects of the agency's safeguarding training are not delivered at this early stage of the foster carers' career.

The fostering panel is very well managed, and provides rigorous scrutiny of assessments and foster carers' annual reviews. The panel chair engages well with the agency, making recommendations regarding the management and support of foster carers, as well as overall practice development across the agency. An example of this is an observation shared with the registered manager on how best to monitor children's and young people's cultural identity needs are being met. The registered manager welcomed this feedback, and uses it as an additional tool for monitoring the overall quality of care.

Fostering panel members are drawn from a range of professional backgrounds, and are only appointed following successful completion of a robust recruitment process. They are able to access training provided by the agency to ensure that their skills and knowledge are updated. Panel business meetings have recently been introduced as a way of ensuring that members are kept up to date with practice developments and changing legislation. Panel members were seen to make well-informed observations and enquiries during panel meetings. These were focused on promoting the best interests of the children and young people cared for by the agency.

There is a robust process for matching children and young people with carers who have the knowledge, understanding and skills to meet their individual needs. Supervising social workers consult colleagues, professionals known to the child and line managers before making a placement. This ensures that they are not working in isolation, and potentially overlooking any aspect of the child's or young person's needs. Operations managers oversee the process and make representations to placing social workers when there is insufficient information available regarding the behaviour and support needs of a child or young person.

Several children and young people were observed in their foster homes during this inspection. All were relaxed and at ease with their foster carers. They clearly feel part of the foster carer's family. One child said, 'I love it here', and went on to talk about family holidays and celebrating special events, such as birthdays. All foster carers spoken to had a thorough understanding of the needs of the children and

young people in placement. This included any particular vulnerabilities and special educational needs. It is evident that arrangements for contact with birth families are well planned and supported, thus ensuring that these events cause minimal anxiety and disruption for the children and young people concerned.

A comprehensive training programme for foster carers is provided by the agency, both online and classroom-based. Practical support is offered to foster carers to make attendance possible, and the agency has a flexible approach to meeting carers' individual learning needs. Foster carers appreciate the fact that they can request specific training on any aspect of caring for a child or young person. This approach ensures that foster carers have the skills needed to meet the diverse and complex needs of the children and young people placed. This, in turn, promotes the stability and continuity of placements.

Foster carers feel well supported by the agency. Supervising social workers build excellent working relationships with foster carers, and support them to manage complex, challenging situations. The agency's consultant child psychotherapist provides specialist advice and guidance to supervising social workers and foster carers, when needed. This ensures that foster carers have a greater insight into the behaviour displayed by vulnerable children and young people, and more effective strategies for responding to challenging situations.

The training and support given to foster carers ensures that they grow in confidence, their knowledge broadens and their skills increase. They become effective members of the professional network supporting the child. One social worker commented that a foster carer had, 'done great life-story work with the child' and that 'she works with us to arrange suitable contact.' When foster carers have concerns that external professionals have not supported a child or young person effectively, they quickly bring this to the attention of their supervising social worker. Action is then taken by the agency to ensure that all professionals are working collaboratively in the best interests of the child or young person.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency prioritises the need to keep children and young people safe, and to protect them from harm. A positive safeguarding culture permeates the strategic and operational functions of the organisation. There are well-established processes for senior management to monitor safeguarding practice across the agency. Forums, such as the safeguarding board, monitor the data provided through internal and external safeguarding audits, and use this to improve practice. Furthermore, the safeguarding board analyses national safeguarding trends and good practice, taking

into account the learning from relevant serious case reviews. This learning informs practice development across the organisation.

This well-established culture of protecting children and young people from harm is embedded in the practice demonstrated by agency staff and carers. Foster carers are familiar with the risks and individual vulnerabilities of the children and young people whom they care for. Foster carers had a sound knowledge of how children and young people can be exploited through social media and the internet. They monitor children's and young people's activity online, and promptly refer any concerns to their supervising social worker. One foster carer had effectively liaised with a child's school to ensure that, during education, the child was receiving appropriate advice and guidance on the dangers associated with the internet. Such action ensures that children and young people become better equipped to keep themselves safe and receive consistent messages.

Overall, investigations into allegations made against foster carers are thorough, and conducted in such a way as to support the carers and protect the child. Timely and effective consultation takes place with the relevant local authorities as part of this process. One local authority designated officer stated that 'investigations are conducted to a good standard.' However, on one occasion this standard of good practice was not maintained. Due to unforeseen staff shortages, the agency's response to an allegation against a foster carer was not well coordinated and did not result in a detailed analysis of the information obtained. Consequently, an action plan was not produced and consideration was not given to the training needs of the foster carers. This shortfall did not result in any children coming to harm.

Foster carers understand the principles of safe care and implement these in practice. Safe care plans are detailed, and provide foster carers with clear guidance on how to meet the individual needs of children and young people. Any risks associated with children and young people's behaviour are identified at the start of a placement. These risks are assessed, and strategies are agreed focussing on reducing the potential for the child or young person to be harmed. Risk assessments are not always updated in a timely manner, and some of the information has not been amended following significant events. The registered manager and supervising social workers are confident that a recently implemented electronic recording system will assist them to update risk assessments more effectively.

Managers, staff and foster carers take effective action when children and young people go missing from their foster home. They are familiar with local partnership arrangements for responding to missing children, and work collaboratively with the police to ensure that they are located at the earliest opportunity. Foster carers encourage children and young people to talk about any concerns that may have led them to go missing, and seek to educate them on the dangers that they may face

while missing. One foster carer had worked tirelessly to identify the possible whereabouts of a particularly vulnerable young person, and subsequently shared relevant information. Ongoing concerns relating to missing episodes are escalated to placing authority social workers. Agency supervising social workers take a robust approach to ensuring multi-agency engagement.

Recruitment and selection processes for staff and fostering panel members are thorough. All statutory checks of potential employees are completed. This minimises the potential for unsuitable adults to gain access to vulnerable children and young people. The process is further enhanced through the interview process, where an applicant's values and motivation for working with children and young people are explored. Good monitoring of staff performance ensures that poor practice which has the potential to impact negatively on children and young people is quickly identified. Established competency and disciplinary processes are implemented to address these issues. In one case, information relating to an individual's poor practice was shared with relevant agencies. However, no consideration was given to consulting the Disclosure and Barring Service.

The agency provides a comprehensive training programme for staff and foster carers. This has a strong overall emphasis on safeguarding children and young people. New foster carers are provided with relevant training during their assessment and induction period. However, some elements of the safeguarding and child protection training are not always delivered to new carers before they begin to take placements. This has included training about child sexual exploitation, and on internet safety and missing from care. These courses are available, but foster carers do not always complete them as part of their preparation and basic training. The registered manager recognises that this is a priority development area.

All children and young people spoken to during the inspection reported that they feel safe in their foster homes, and expressed confidence in speaking to their carers about any worries or concerns they may have. All could recall being given information about how to make a complaint if they are unhappy. The complaints process is explained using age-appropriate language in guides which all children and young people receive when they are placed.

A particular strength of the agency is its commitment to promoting children's and young people's participation. The agency's youth council contributes effectively to practice development, and is currently working alongside staff on ways to promote and educate children about how to keep safe on the internet. Including young people in this area of practice development has resulted in staff gaining renewed insight into the nature of the risks involved. Consequently, there is now the potential to develop practice in this area, based on evidence obtained from the children and young people themselves.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency is effectively led by an experienced and qualified registered manager. She is supported by four operations managers across a large geographical region. This ensures that there is appropriate managerial oversight across the service. Managerial tasks and responsibilities are effectively delegated, and good communication across the management team ensures that the registered manager maintains detailed knowledge on how the whole agency is performing. Similarly, well-established monitoring and reporting systems allow senior management to analyse the progress made by the agency and to identify any areas requiring development.

Leaders and managers maintain positive working relationships with a number of placing local authorities. They ensure that communication channels allow for effective exchange of information. Leaders and managers act as good role models in this respect, so that staff mirror the positive relationships with their local authority colleagues. One social worker commented that 'the contact I have with the supervising social worker is very good. She keeps me updated and attends all relevant meetings.'

Operations managers develop detailed knowledge of their particular geographical location and the needs of their placing authorities. Referral trends are monitored centrally by the organisation, and this information is used locally to analyse further the needs of children looked after in the area. Consequently, recruitment activity is focused on attracting carers with the potential to meet local need. This approach has had positive results. A placements officer from one local authority stated that, 'Fostering Solutions South has been very helpful when it comes to meeting our requests.'

The importance of measuring children's and young people's progress, and of monitoring the quality of care being delivered, is recognised and given high priority. Consequently, the agency is able to demonstrate how, over time, children and young people make progress in areas such as academic achievement. Processes for monitoring and evaluating the quality of care engage a wide range of stakeholders, including children and young people. In addition, external evaluations ensure that there is an independent element to the monitoring process. This has ensured that some of the minor shortfalls identified at this inspection, such as the need to review and update risk assessments, are promptly brought to the attention of leaders and managers.

The views of all stakeholders are valued and taken into account when developing action plans to improve the service. Excellent procedures are in place to ensure that the views of foster carers are brought to the attention of senior managers and so shape the future development of the service. These procedures also ensure that foster carers are kept informed of proposed changes to policy and practice. The flow of information results in foster carers feeling part of the larger organisation.

The agency's statement of purpose is a generic document that is applied to all fostering services delivered by the organisation. Nevertheless, it gives a full and accurate description of the services provided. The children's and young people's guides are child-focused, age appropriate and provide contact information for external support agencies. These include an independent advocacy service which, according to leaders and managers, is rarely used. The design of the children's and young people's guides has benefited from the insight given by the agency's youth council.

Although there has recently been a shortage of staff in one geographical region, strong management and the commitment of staff has ensured that this has not had a negative impact on the quality of service delivered. All staff receive regular, high-quality supervision which allows them to reflect on their practice and to identify areas for professional development. Safeguarding matters are a standard agenda item in supervision, providing the opportunity for staff to explore any potential threats to the safety and well-being of children and young people. Effective supervision arrangements also ensure that the fostering panel chair and registered manager are well supported. Leaders and managers reflect on the effectiveness of supervision arrangements, and make changes when necessary to improve the opportunities for learning and personal development.

Professional development is also promoted through inclusive team meetings, which are seen as a forum for discussing and sharing good practice, and through annual staff appraisals. The inclusion of children and young people in the staff appraisal process is further evidence of the agency's commitment to hearing and valuing the voice of children and young people.

Staff access a comprehensive range of training courses which provide them with the necessary knowledge and skills to support foster carers effectively. Leaders and managers encourage staff to identify additional training in specialist areas of practice. Some staff and foster carers are currently accessing training focused on supporting children and young people with complex needs. This is introducing them to new and creative approaches to delivering care, and it demonstrates the agency's commitment to continuous improvement.

Appropriate action has been taken in relation to all events notified to the regulator. All recommendations made at the last inspection in January 2013 have been acted upon. The recommendation made in respect of young people acquiring independent living skills is ongoing, and some aspects of this will be delivered through a planned workshop for young people who are preparing to leave care.

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.