

Fostering Solutions Limited South

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC423396
Inspection date	24/01/2013
Inspector	David Coulter
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

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Date of last inspection	22/03/2011

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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 that operates 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 sibling groups, disabled young people, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and parents with new born children. The service offers both short and long term placements; there are approximately 210 approved foster carers in 122 households who can offer up to 260 placements.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

Evidence indicates the service is providing high quality care to some extremely vulnerable young people. The service's matching process is effective and placement stability indicates carers are appropriately meeting the often complex needs of the children and young people in their care. Many initial short-term placements have developed into longer permanent placements. This has provided much needed stability and security in the lives of many children and young people.

Carers have aspirations for the children and young people in their care and aim to ensure they are provided with access to activities and resources that will help them reach their potential. Carers are pro-active in advocating on behalf of the children and young people in their care. Outcomes for children and young people are positive and evidence indicates that once settled all make significant progress in areas of their lives such as education, behaviour and the acquisition of social and life-skills. Young people confirmed they regularly access a range of stimulating social and educational opportunities. Such opportunities allow them to extend their social horizons and develop new social relationships. It is evident that such experiences contribute positively to each individual's self-confidence.

Children and young people talked in extremely positive terms about their carers and the nurturing environments in which they lived. All said they were regularly consulted about all aspects of their care by their carers, their social workers and service staff. The views of children and young people make a significant contribution to the development of the service's policies, procedures and working practices.

The service is well managed and operates with a group of highly motivated carers and a team of extremely experienced and knowledgeable staff. All are dedicated to improving the service for the benefit of children and young people. Staff have manageable caseloads that enable them to provide extremely good support and guidance to carers. There is a culture of training and professional development within the service and an expectation that carers and staff will access opportunities to extend their knowledge on an on-going basis. The service has developed an excellent quality assurance system that provides managers with regular updates on how all areas of the service are operating. The service works well with placing authorities to develop services in response to changing trends.

Although there are a number of recommendations arising from the inspection, they are aimed to further improve the quality of care which is already assessed as outstanding.

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 children are supported to develop skills needed for a successful transition into adulthood; in particular develop a resource pack to further assist carers to help young people acquire a range of key independent living skills NMS (12.1)
- ensure each person on the central list (in particular panel members) has access to appropriate training and skills development and is kept abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance (NMS 23.11)
- ensure foster carers develop the skills needed to diffuse difficult behaviour so that physical interventions are avoided and that placement plans set out individual strategies to be used to achieve this. (Children Act 1989 Statutory Guidance Volume 4 (3.96))

Outcomes for children and young people

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

The service strives to ensure that children and young people are placed with carers who meet their specific physical, social and cultural needs as well as providing regular access to their established social networks. By continuing with existing educational placements children and young people can maintain some continuity in

their lives and minimise the inevitable disruption associated with entering care. A high degree of placement stability indicates children and young people are appropriately matched. Placement disruptions are unusual and children young people normally leave their placements as part of a planned move. A significant number of children and young people, who were initially placed with carers on a short-term basis, have settled so well that their placements have become long-term. An increasing number are staying with their carers beyond the age of 18 under supported living arrangements. As one care leaver reported, 'I arrived at my foster home and never left, I feel part of the family.'

On admission children and young people are made aware of the role and responsibilities of their foster carers and helped to understand the particular circumstances that brought them into care. Children and young people indicated a high level of satisfaction about their placements. All said they were welcomed into their new homes by all members of the family. Those spoken with indicated that if they had any personal worries or concerns they would, in the first instance, raise it with their carers. Positive comments were also made about their accommodation and the environment in which they were living.

Children and young people are supported in furthering their education and in maximising their educational potential. Carers assist children and young people in attaining the goals identified in their personal education plans and liaise with teachers and placing authorities to address any issues or problems that could be inhibiting their progress. Children and young people who are struggling at school are offered practical support. In certain instances this can include carers accompanying them into the classroom and undertaking additional work with them at home. Attendance levels are good and once settled children and young people show significant progress in their educational attainment. Many young people progress on to college placements. The educational achievements of each child and young person are recognised and celebrated. The service's in-house magazines, Your Space and Care Matters, regularly report on individual's achievements.

The health and well-being of each child and young person is given a high priority within the service and carers will ensure that any identified physical or mental health issues are appropriately addressed. The health of children and young people is carefully monitored and dentists and doctors provide regular checks. Children and young people are helped to adopt healthy lifestyles by eating wisely and taking regular exercise. Young people in their teens are helped to assume responsibility for monitoring their own health and are provided with advice and guidance on issues such as the use of alcohol, drugs and sexual health. There is a focus on helping young people make positive life choices that will help them achieve physical and emotional maturity. While it is clear young people are helped to acquire many independent living skills in preparation for moving on, the present system appears somewhat ad-hoc and would benefit from a more structured approach.

Young people said they could exercise choice over many aspects of their lives and were regularly consulted by their carers on, amongst other things, their culinary preferences and social activities. They felt their views were valued in family decisions

over such things as holiday destinations. Service staff regularly consult children and young people about the care they receive, individually through the reviewing process and collectively through bodies such as the children in care council, and support groups. Supervising social workers also meet and talk with them during their regular home visits. Effective lines of communication between supervising and children's social workers ensure information relating to each young person's progress is appropriately shared and that any difficulties are resolved.

An annual assessment has proved an extremely effective way of ascertaining the views of children and young people who do not wish to participate in support groups. The assessment is produced in age appropriate formats. The results from the most recent assessment indicates that children and young people feel safe in their placement, are listened to, have regular contact with their social workers and family members, receive help with their schoolwork, regularly see their friends and are supported in pursuing their interests and hobbies. The assessment responses make a significant contribution to the development of the service and have influenced many policies, procedures and working practices.

The service clearly recognizes that many of the children and young people placed with them have experienced the insecurity associated with a chaotic lifestyle and as a consequence find it difficult to establish routines and adhere to behavioural boundaries. Supervising social workers help carers develop clear boundaries that are consistently applied. Positive and respectful behaviour is reinforced with praise and rewards and sanctions are only used for serious misdemeanours. Most young people respond positively to the approach and incidents of anti-social and inappropriate behaviour decrease as their sense of security increases. One care leaver recounted how her behaviour had positively changed during her placement and that her carers had, 'stood by her in difficult times because they really cared.'

Quality of service

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

A range of marketing techniques are deployed to attract prospective carers to the service, including those from minority communities. The service has a well-established Equality and Diversity group that successfully develops and promotes equality and diversity issues throughout the organisation. The service has high expectations of its foster carers and recruits only those who are willing to develop the skills necessary to meet the needs of a range of looked after children in their area. Procedures for recruiting carers and staff are robust and ensure unsuitable individuals do not gain access to children and young people in care. The assessment process is thorough and the family circumstances and living arrangements of all prospective carers are determined at an early stage. All prospective carers have to successfully complete a skills to foster programme that includes inputs by a range of professionals who provide an insight into the complex needs and often challenging behaviours of young people in care. Only those that successfully complete the training programme and meet all necessary the health and safety requirements relating to their homes proceed to panel for approval.

There is a well-established culture of training and development within the service and expectation that carers will, during their fostering careers, continually update their knowledge and skills. All new carers complete a comprehensive two year development programme that includes training in key areas such as attachment, contact, education, health and development, safeguarding and managing challenging behaviour. Carers confirmed that the service provides good quality training and provides, amongst other things, a good insight into the difficulties many young people in care experience especially in regard to both forming and sustaining relationships. Carer training also raises awareness of equality issues and specific courses focus on culture, religion and disability. The service is recognised as a 'Positive About Disability' organisation. Carers and staff frequently undertake joint training and regular support groups provide opportunities for healthy discussion. Having successfully completed their CWDC training, a significant number are now undertaking an NVQ level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young People's Workforce. The training needs of carers are identified on an on-going basis and an annual training plan is developed. There is an effective system to monitor attendance at training.

Carers are extremely appreciative of the support and guidance their whole family receives from staff within the service who are, according to one carer, 'always willing to help.' Special mention was made of the professionalism of their supervising social workers who provide them with regular opportunities to reflect on their practice. Carers confirmed that staff are always quick to intervene and provide additional support if they are experiencing difficulties. The service provided out of office hours was deemed to be a reliable source of advice. Carers feel the key role they occupy within the service is recognised and their views and opinions about the progress of the children and young people in their care are valued by service staff and allied professionals.

The service benefits from the expert scrutiny of an appropriately constituted fostering panel. Decisions are made on good quality and rigorous assessments. Panel members provide expertise from within childcare and related fields including education and health. The central list provides enough members to ensure panels can meet regularly and remain quorate. The approval and reviewing functions of the panel provides an effective quality assurance function that ensures that young people are only cared for by appropriately trained and vetted foster carers. Panel members provide advice to supervising social workers on the quality of their assessments and review reports. This feedback helps drive up the quality of both assessments and the on-going support of carers. Although the panel is working effectively, being relatively new, its members would benefit from the opportunity to access more joint training.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

The primary aim of the service is to provide children and young people within placements that keep them safe so they achieve positive outcomes. Safeguarding underpins all policies, procedures and working practices. The service is extremely pro-active in developing its safeguarding practices and has created a safeguarding board that meets regularly to discuss all incidents and concerns relating to the young people in its care. Best practice is identified and shared between all staff teams.

Every effort is made to ensure that carers are provided with key information about a young person before a placement is made and risk assessments are extensively used to identify any areas of potential concern. The needs of household members are always considered prior to the placement of a new child. Although behaviour management plans are developed to provide carers with strategies to address behavioural issues, they do not currently identify individual strategies to avoid physical interventions with young people who can present with challenging behaviours.

Carers spoke positively about the safeguarding training they receive and feel it provides a good insight into the impact different forms of abuse can have on the development of children and young people. Carers confirmed that safeguarding issues are always discussed during their monthly supervision sessions. All said they are made aware of the need to ensure family members develop good safe caring practices. Carers are aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to the reporting of any safeguarding worries or concerns.

Although the service operates within a 'safe caring' framework, it is not risk averse and there is an expectation that children and young people will live full and active lives by participating in social and recreational activities, both within the home and in the local community. Carers work alongside young people and help them develop effective strategies and practices to keep themselves safe. Carers are successful in breaking established patterns of anti-social and destructive behaviours. Children and young people reported that they feel safe in their placements. None reported being bullied and all indicated they had an adult to whom they could report any worries or concerns. Questionnaire responses indicated they are aware of how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

The service has established robust systems to monitor all placements. Supervising social workers meet with their carers in their homes on a monthly basis and undertake at least one unannounced visit annually. Each carer's home is subject to an annual household review to ensure it meets accepted standards. By undertaking home visits to each of the carers in their area operations managers maintain contact with the circumstances associated with each placement. The views of young people are sought about their placements and contribute to the carers' reviews.

Leadership and management

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

There is an excellent quality assurance system that permeates all aspects of the service's work and contributes to continuing improvement. The service has effectively harnessed technology to develop comprehensive monitoring systems that provide staff with up to date information and identify any shortfalls that need addressing. For example, staff can, at the touch of a button, determine if carers have attended planned training. All non-attendance is now followed up. All staff, regardless of their work setting, can access this information. Such systems have had a positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Although different systems are used to monitor different aspects of the service, staff are clearly aware that their function is to contribute to better outcomes for children and young people. The service has effective administrative and recording systems and there are secure facilities for the storage of confidential information.

There is a clear commitment on the part of staff and carers to continue to develop the service. The service consults widely and the information obtained from young people, carers and placing authorities is used to develop new initiatives. Carers are encouraged to raise concerns and are responded to appropriately. Outcomes from investigated complaints contribute to the service's robust approach to improvement. It is evident that greater monitoring and wider consultation with interested parties has led to an increase in both the quantity and quality of information available for managers. The availability of such evidence contributes to more informed decision making.

The service operates with a suitably qualified and experienced management team. Managers are clearly aware of the need for the service to remain responsive to changing needs within the communities in which they operate. Demographic trends are carefully followed and regular consultations are held with contracting managers from placing authorities to determine what specific placements need to be developed to meet their needs. For example, the service has, in recent times, been asked to provide more sibling group and parent and child placements.

The service benefits from having a highly motivated and experienced staff team who are clearly focused on improving outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Staff feel their views are valued and they are actively involved in the development of the service. Staff keep abreast of developments within the child care field by regularly access training opportunities and consulting current research. The service operates with a full complement of staff who operate with appropriate caseloads.

Staff confirmed operations managers are always accessible and they receive good quality and regular supervision. There is an effective integrated management structure and co-ordination and communication between homeworking and office based staff is good. There is a general consensus amongst carers and staff that the service is well managed and maintains a clear focus on providing high quality foster care. Developments and new initiatives are encouraged and best practice is shared amongst all regions.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for independent fostering agencies.