

Sunbeam Fostering Agency- Midlands

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This privately owned fostering agency was registered in March 2011. It is one of three agencies, and part of the Sunbeam Fostering Group. The registered branch is in Coventry, and an office in Worksop supports foster carers living in the north. The agency plans to shortly relocate the Worksop office to Nottingham.

It offers a range of mainstream fostering placements and also provides space for children to have supervised contact at both offices.

There are currently 61 approved fostering households and 73 children and young people living in foster homes.

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: **requires improvement.**

The agency has made substantial improvements in many areas of its operation, particularly the quality of service. However, isolated and very recent safeguarding concerns have not been well managed and so the agency requires improvement to be good. Inconsistent reporting about safeguarding matters within the agency means that the registered person has not been aware of important safety issues. Formal and informal communication systems, including routine meetings and professional and foster carer supervision, have not always identified or resolved critical safeguarding issues.

Staff do not fully implement the new policy and procedure for children who may go missing from care. Recommendations are made about other elements to further improve good practice. Individual children and young people's risk assessment guidance about response when missing in some cases is not clear or detailed about individual circumstances and how foster carers need to respond to them.

Documentation to support the agency's decision making processes and children and young people's progress is not maximised, or may not always be in place.

In other areas, the agency has made good progress. Much improved core functions of recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers are now well embedded. Panel and approval processes are now firmly based in a good knowledge of the fostering tasks, and children and young people's needs.

Foster carers continue to express whole hearted appreciation of the support they get from the agency and the quality of their assessment and training. One said, 'we have had great support from Sunbeam and particularly our supervising social workers.'

Placing authorities report high levels of satisfaction with the service and feel confident making placements because they see the progress that their children and young people make. The agency provides a responsive service to families of brothers and sisters and placement stability is good. The agency has worked hard to consult with foster children and foster carers: and takes on board their suggestions and views.

Effective electronic record systems allow the registered person to draw data and get a better picture about children and young people's key issues and progress.

Managerial arrangements have changed since the last inspection in 2012, and are changing again. The agency has made prompt succession arrangements to maintain stability and leadership. The new manager has already been appointed from within and knows, foster carers, staff and children and young people. The agency has the capacity to secure the necessary improvements.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
11(a)	Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This is with respect to acting on safeguarding concerns and improving the quality of risk assessments. (Regulation 11 (a))	04/02/2015
13(3)(b)	Prepare and implement a policy, which is agreed with the local police, setting out the procedure to be followed when a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 13(3)(b))	04/02/2015
21(4)	Ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21(4))	04/02/2015

Recommendations

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

- Ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. Specifically, record the reasons for recommendation where there have been discussions about actual safeguarding issues, training, and undertakings given by foster carers. (NMS 14.7)
- Demonstrate consistently, including from written records, that the agency follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (NMS 19.2)
- Ensure records are clear, up to date and contribute to an understanding of the child's life: this is with specific reference to demonstrating effective risk reduction in written risk assessments and the documentation to support matching considerations, showing any gaps and the impact on other members of fostering households. (NMS 26)

- Ensure the fostering service and foster carer contribute effectively to each child's Placement Plan review and statutory review of the child's care plan. (NMS 31.7)
- Ensure that the foster carer is given all the information they need about the child to enable them to provide appropriate care, and make sure that this information is kept up to date. This information must always include the child's up-to-date care plan and the placement plan. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.6, page 14)
- Ensure foster carers know what authority they have to make decisions about everyday matters involving the child. Arrangements for delegating authority from the parents to the local authority and/or from the local authority to the foster carer, must be discussed and agreed as part of the care planning process, particularly at placement planning meetings, and agreements should be recorded in the placement plan. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.13, page 16)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people know who they can talk to, they know the manager by first name: a choice of children's guides give them written information about the agency and what they can expect. Some children and young people get photos and child friendly electronic information about the fostering household before they arrive. The agency plans for this to become routine practice to reduce anxiety and uncertainty about moving into a new home. Children and young people are consulted about plans for their care and are kept informed of progress; their views are now fully embedded in service development. They have a lively quarterly newsletter that keeps them in touch. Events and activities for young people are well focused, not just on fun, but on their needs in foster care. Consultation is not just effective, it is creative. There is very good practice in the recent consultation and activity event for young unaccompanied asylum seekers, reflecting their culture and specific needs and interest. This has resulted in better community involvement for them and language improvement: sports activities and more trips are planned to ease their isolation.

Many young people struggle with complicated and angry feelings about their birth families. One child said that since coming into foster carer and living with the foster family she was: 'happy and not confused now.' Foster carers do some very skilled work to help them understand their histories, cope with their feelings, and provide an unconditional place of safety. Foster carers give assiduous support to make sure that children and young people see their birth families regularly, if that is the plan. Placing social workers describe many of the foster carers as going, 'above and beyond' for the children and young people in their care.

Children and young people become part of their foster families. They become healthier, and feel more confident. Toddlers become potty trained and make happy starts at nursery. Children and young people learn how to take pride in themselves, keep themselves clean and tidy and take care of their possessions. They learn to swim, take art in local village fairs at their new homes, do cross country for the first time. One young person described how happy he was in placement: 'it is brilliant, my carers are brilliant.' Another said: 'They treat me like their own son. I love my foster family and i want to stay with them forever.'

Children and young people feel that the adults around them value their achievements and their progress. The emotional care that foster carers give, lets children and young people feel the same as their peers at school. The 'level playing field' of secure family care, helps them to get on with the educational and social aspects of preparing for their future. One young person, who was a persistent avoider of school and had been excluded and now has 97% attendance at college. The foster carer has been instrumental in supporting and securing the right course to engage his interest. There is a celebratory emphasis on gathering and recording the many positives in young people's lives, culminating in the agency's own awards ceremony.

Foster carers make sure that young people have the information they need to practice safe sex and talk to them about responsible, safe loving relationships. Even young people who put themselves at risk when they run away, or make relationships with unsafe peers, continue to have constructive relationships with their foster carers, who keep advising them about making safer choices. Placing authorities recognise, that despite continuing risky behaviour for some young people, they are safer and more emotionally secure. Despite high risks and a worrying history, one social worker said that their young person had, 'done amazing.'

Good support helps young people make the move into independence. Pathway planning and transitions to the next stage of their young adult lives are managed well. Foster carers keep in touch and continue to look out informally for young people's well-being. One young person said, they would give their placement and foster carer, '10/10' and said that they are: 'brilliant, excellent and I have no concerns or worries at all'. One placing authority independent reviewing officer said: 'The agency and foster carers have worked hard to promote best outcomes for the child in care, they have been proactive in promoting care needs, leisure activities and opportunities to make a positive contribution, as well as supporting education and promoting best outcomes, very positive.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

A clear recruitment and support strategy now links with the placing authority. The agency is tailoring its activities within a smaller geographical area, focusing on Nottingham and Coventry. This has resulted in the departure of several foster families, more geographically distant, or for whom placements were unlikely, and also some staff. The responsible individual states that the agency is in a period of consolidation, and understands that foster carers want a 'personal feel'. The registered person has worked hard on foster carer retention, and accepts some loss has been inevitable because of the need to have the right people in the right place.

The panel is well resourced and panel members have the right expertise and experience. There is much stronger communication between panel and the service managers about the quality of panel business. Processes for proper consideration, approval and review of foster carers are robust. Quality assurance of assessment reports is generally good and ensures that all checks have been completed before presentation to panel. The agency's decision makers provide a fail-safe stop on processes when occasionally they are not robust. Processes for changes to categories of approval are accurately reflected in the notification to foster carers and the register. The legal requirements for qualifying determinations, processes for changes to approval categories, notification and the register are well understood and implemented.

Foster carers are happy with the assessment process, the level and quality of their training and the support from the agency to complete their fostering induction standards. Training for foster carers is markedly improved. The agency provides

targeted 1:1 or planned group sessions and maximises in-house skills as well as external specialists. For example, agency social workers take child sexual exploitation or behaviour management training directly to foster carers' homes when there is an immediate need. Foster carers say that they can ask for more bespoke training and the agency will always try and source this for them. They said that their recent training has given them, 'a lot of support and means to manage behaviours better'. Others commented very positively about recent training in understanding behaviour, Autism, attachment, learning disability and attention deficit disorder. Hospital-based health professionals deliver training where children and young people need more skilled input, such as for gastrostomy techniques and management of epilepsy. Support groups happen in each geographical location and are directly linked to improving practice, as well as opportunities for informal sharing, advice and networking between carers.

Placing authorities are positive about matching: 'We find them a responsive Agency who always reply to our referrals in a considered manner – offering appropriate matches as opposed to whatever they have available.' Placing authorities also value the agency's contact with them: 'prompt response to referrals and spending time to talk through any issues...good communication has enabled us to achieve good outcomes'.

The agency has done well to recruit and support foster families to care for family groups of brothers, sisters and even young uncles. Large foster homes mean they can stay together. One placements team gave feedback about the offer of a placement for such a group: that: 'it has been exceedingly helpful that your carers have been so flexible.' Foster Carers demonstrate a good level of understanding of complex family dynamics and history. Unplanned endings are minimised. Placement stability is good. One placing authority with several children in placement said: 'They ask for help and support when needed and put in a lot of effort to secure placement stability and sustainability.'

Another placing authority commented on the high level of foster carer initiative to support children in difficulty: 'Willing to step in and give the social worker ideas, look at ways to make the placement better for the children. Even the manager got involved which was really nice to see.'

The agency helps foster carers to prepare children and young people to return home, or to make the move on to adoption. Many foster carers show unstinting affection and commitment in very difficult circumstances. One placing authority social worker said that foster carers had worked, 'cooperatively and flexibly.' Another placing social worker described the progress in only a short time since moving to live with the agency's foster carers. Their child, previously challenging and violent, is now, 'responding very well to the boundaries and care'.

Foster carers continue to be very satisfied with the fostering service and with the quality of working relationships they experience. The agency embraces the cultural diversity of the foster carers and children and celebrates Eid as well as Christmas. They share good quality information with foster carers about fostering business at regular foster carer support groups and through regular, good quality newsletters. Foster carers are very appreciative of the regular, reliable and responsive support

from fostering social workers. One said: 'we can contact her anytime over any issues and she gets right on it, always there when needed.' Many foster carers declared their appreciation for supervising social workers who have stayed late or supported them 'out of hours', one said this support was 'tremendous.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Communication about safeguarding issues has not been consistently good enough. The agency failed to act and follow through after a young person, already at risk, was found to be carrying a knife for someone, and was witness to a sexual assault. Senior staff managed this safeguarding issue informally and in isolation from the registered person. They did not ensure that the local authority request for action were carried out. Fostering staff did not ensure that this safeguarding incident was discussed, recorded and concluded.

Several young people are at risk of child sexual exploitation, or of involvement with crime when they go missing from their foster homes, or from school. Partial implementation of the new 'missing from care' policy, means that there is risk of confusion in response and understanding. The plans and records about children and young people who go missing do not reflect the service's own policy and staff do not share them with police routinely as required by that policy or with the placing authority. Risk assessments are not sufficiently detailed to identify what actions foster carers should take when children are at risk of, or do run away.

Recruitment records meet the regulatory requirements, however, are not well organised and do not reflect good practice. For example, reference requests do not ask referees to comment on the applicant's suitability to work with vulnerable children. The agency takes up personal references from friends, or the last employer, even when there is a stronger source of information. Records do not always show how applicants have explained gaps in employment.

When the registered manager is fully aware of safeguarding issues she ensures these are managed well. Serious concerns following one investigation, resulted in a referral to the disclosure and barring service. One placing authority was impressed with the manager's input about child protection: 'I have found her to be thoroughly professional in her approach to the case. She was clearly concerned about the welfare of the children and keen to work with Local Authority colleagues to investigate the issues, whilst being supporting to the carers.'

There is now a much better process for ensuring resolutions and lessons are learnt about any allegation or concern about the quality of foster care. These go back to panel and foster carers are party to the review report that accompanies this process. Where concerns are significant and foster carers resign before termination, the manager writes to the host local authority to ensure they are aware that the agency holds information relevant to ex-foster carers. Foster carer supervision picks up training issues and the manager audits to ensure improvement.

Foster carers understand children and young people's care history and are perceptive about some of their unsafe behaviour. They work to keep children and young people safe and give them skills to take care of themselves. Conversations about dangers of being out on the street, drug taking, involvement in crime, are regular features of fostering family life, as are risks to the very young. One foster carer recounted when one four year old child first arrived: 'they had no sense of danger or what a safe adult was- they would talk to anybody. Now we have introduced a rule that he can only hold someone's hand if he knows their name and I am around. This has worked well. We have conversations about staying safe and being with a grown up at all times when he is out.'

More robust assessment processes mean that children and young people in foster homes are safer and no foster carer begins caring for children until the environment has been approved as fully fit. Twice yearly unannounced inspections exceed the minimum standard and safe care plans are the norm. Health and safety arrangements are proportionate and reflect good family-based care.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Further improvements are required for the agency to be consistently good. Safeguarding action, senior staff communication, and management reporting systems, to capture where there are weaknesses, require improvement. Formal supervision between fostering service staff and foster carers failed on three occasions to deal with a serious safeguarding issue, and it was 'lost from sight.' Consequently, the registered person was unaware and unable to take action.

Safeguarding training at a senior level could be better. Senior managers have had safeguarding training by the agency, but this has not included management of allegations, or other aspects usually covered in 'designated safeguarding lead officer' training. This may explain their failure to communicate with the registered person, or deliver the local authority's safeguarding requests.

The registered person has taken action to improve after the last inspection. All previous regulatory shortfalls are now met. The agency's statement of purpose is now a realistic reflection of what the foster carers can offer. The new website also assists so that all stakeholders can be clear about services and facilities provided. There have been significant improvements to the core functions of the agency, in the assessment, approval, and decision making around the fostering panel and decision maker. There is now no conflict of interest on the panel. Recruitment files now meet the legal minimum. Children and young people's accidents are now well monitored. Their information now clearly shows medication routines and makes clear how complex health care, such as gastrostomy feeding, and mobility needs are managed. The agency's systems to respond to stakeholder views are much improved. The quality of foster carer training has really improved and the rate of successful completion of national induction standards within 12 months of approval continues at

a healthy level. These improvements mean that children and young people benefit from reliable, better planned and supported care.

Some areas for further improvement relate to the quality of the agency's documentation to evidence their good practice. Panel minutes and the reasons for recommendations about foster carer suitability do not always reflect the detail of discussion and deliberation, and so may not provide the best information to the decision maker on which to base their decision. Information about essential matching considerations, training commitments, pledges by foster carers are not always explicit. Consequently, some significant information may be lost to anyone not actually present at the panel.

Matching records do not always show how staff plan to fill gaps in foster carer skill, training or experience to meet children and young people's challenging or complex health needs, or how a new placement could impact on existing children in the foster home. There are still some areas where it is difficult to deliver external training in time to enhance children's experience in a placement, so carers do sometimes care for children with particular needs before they are fully skilled up.

Not all children and young people have good quality placing authority documentation, for example: health assessment reports; care and placement plans; or agreements to delegated authority, despite the registered person's attempts to chase this. Managerial monitoring flags that the information is missing, but does not maximise all opportunities to obtain it. Fostering social workers do not always contribute fully to children's statutory reviews. Their written reports do not always flag up that information is missing or out of date. This is a missed opportunity to advocate to the independent reviewing officer on behalf of children, to ensure foster carers have the information they need.

Strategic relationships at management level with police, virtual school heads, child health or local safeguarding children boards, in the geographical areas covered by the agency, are not yet highly effective. There are, however, cooperative working relationships with partner organisations on a child-by-child basis.

Leaders and managers, and actively involved directors, have rallied around the previous regulatory shortfalls and there has been a significant improvement in the level of monitoring and tracking about key activities of the agency and support for children and young people. The registered person has a qualitative eye on all aspects of the service delivery. All aspects of operation are monitored electronically and through system of reports and meetings. This covers the agency functions as well as allowing an increasing focus on actual outcomes for children. The registered person is preparing to make its first report on the review of the quality of care at the end of March 2016.

Consultation with children, young people and foster carers is now part of regular managerial review and the registered manager follows up to strengthen practice. The agency uses easily accessible electronic surveys and so knows very quickly what children and foster carers think. For example, foster carers were unsure about responding to child protection concerns and so the manager delivered a range of information events to meet this need.

The registered manager has a new ethos of learning from incidents and allegations and has developed electronic systems to enable her to better demonstrate improving outcomes for children. The registered manager takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. It is unfortunate that no staff made her aware of the serious safeguarding issue so that she could lend her support to resolving the issue.

There has been a turnover of staff and managers within the agency. The previous registered manager resigned in March 2014, and the new manager was appointed in May 2014. She is a qualified social worker, holds managerial qualifications at level five, and is experienced. The registered manager is well respected by local authority's foster carers and children. They see her as an active champion. She is visible in all areas of the agency. She has now resigned and a new manager appointed from within, also qualified and experienced.

Turnover in agency staff has been managed to minimise disruption to foster carers, though some has been inevitable. One placing authority notes as positive that, despite the change of fostering social worker: 'a manager attended the first review at the placement, suggesting positive interface with service delivery, as well as supporting change of supervising social worker.' The company is investing in recruiting social work and support staff to fill gaps, and has appointed a new manager and a quality assurance manager to oversee developments. The registered person manages two offices and is planning the move from Worksop to a new location in Nottingham.

Agency staff are qualified for their roles and the agency provides social work placements to neighbouring universities. Social workers are keen to develop their therapeutic knowledge, direct work and play skills. They are positive about their role and the agency, and happy with their support and training. They are knowledgeable about their foster carers and children and have a good grasp of current issues in children's social care.

Stakeholders continue to be complimentary about the service and pleased with the progress that children and young people make in placement. The agency is held in good regard by very many of the placing authorities who use it, for example: 'Agency has been brilliant. Good communication.' Foster carers share this view; they say they feel proud to work for this organisation because the, 'agency expects high standards.'

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.