

Match Foster Care Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Tracy Murty
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a small independent fostering agency operated by a private organisation in Droitwich. It provides short and long-term, emergency and respite foster placements for children.

There are no conditions applicable.

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 **good**.

This was the first inspection of this agency since its registration last year. The agency consistently promotes and maintains good outcomes for children. It has a very clear focus on ensuring that children have a positive experience in foster care. The agency achieves this through good partnership working with a range of involved agencies and organisations. Plans for children detail their starting points and needs, with the agency working proactively to ensure those needs are consistently met. This has led to increased placement stability for children and noticeable improvements in their self-confidence and achievements.

Children feel safe and are protected from harm. This is attributable to the commitment of the agency staff and to the experienced and competent foster carers they work with. Placing authorities, education providers and health professionals all report high levels of satisfaction with the services provided to children. Consultation with children is a real strength of this agency. Children feel very much a part of the agency and are able to contribute to how it is run and develops.

Leadership and management of the agency are very good. Robust monitoring and tracking of all aspects of the services ensures continued improvements are made. Staff feel highly supported, trained and able to make a positive contribution to the agency and how it is run. Foster carers all report very high levels of satisfaction with the support they receive from the Registered Manager and staff team. For those who have worked for other fostering agencies they state this agency is by far the best

they have worked for.

The quality of service provision is outstanding. Recruitment of staff across all areas of the services is highly efficient and robust. Foster carers receive high quality training and support from the staff team. A highly effective and efficient fostering panel further adds to the quality and calibre of foster carers. Foster carers present as highly skilled, competent and totally committed to meeting the needs of children placed with them.

One recommendation has been made following this inspection. This relates to the need for foster carers to ensure that they collaborate in the development of pathway plans. This is to build on the work they already do with young people approaching independence. There has been no impact on the welfare or safety of children from this.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers contribute to the development of the pathway plan for an "eligible" child and work collaboratively with the young person's social worker or personal advisor in implementing the plan. (NMS 12.2)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

Children consistently report being very happy with their foster placements. They articulate a clear understanding of the reasons for their placements and of the carers meeting their holistic needs. One child stated 'I have lots of help with my problems and worries, my foster mum is my main charm, because when I feel down she will be there for me and cheer me up.'

Children make good progress and experience an increase in confidence in their abilities in placement. This is achieved by foster carers working proactively with all involved agencies to meet their needs. Children feel valued as part of the foster family. They form and maintain meaningful relationships with peers in the area where they live. Children feel very well integrated into their local communities and take part in a wide range of activities, which further enhance their feelings of belonging. One education provider stated 'You would not recognise the change in this child since they moved to this foster placement. They are happier in school, involved in lots of activities and take pride in their achievements now.'

There have been very few unplanned endings to placements for children over the past year. This reflects the commitment of the agency to ensuring that the matching

of foster carers with children is robust and well considered. Foster carers report high levels of satisfaction with the matching process. They feel that the high level of support offered to them by the agency staff also ensures that placements remain stable. One carer stated 'The manager and staff are always there for us, twenty-four hours, seven-days a week. We never feel unsupported if we have any worries about our placements.'

Children's health needs receive full and prompt attention by foster carers. Records of all health appointments and treatments provide a detailed account of the health needs of each child placed. Foster carers assist children to learn the importance of living healthy lifestyles and meeting their own health needs wherever possible. Foster carers work with young people to help them understand key health risks. They support them to implement strategies to reduce smoking and work with relevant health professionals to further support young people.

Education providers, across various settings, praise the agency and foster carers for their commitment to meeting the educational needs of all children placed. They report high levels of attendance of children on a regular basis and very good communication and attendance at meetings by foster carers. Given their starting points, children achieve well in their education. Progress made by them is well recorded by the agency and monitored by the staff team to ensure continued improvements. The agency provides and pays for additional support for children to further assist their achievements. One education tutor who has been involved with a young person for over two years reported 'this young person is a brilliant student. The foster carers have worked closely with me to ensure that his education needs are always met. He has come on a lot in their care.'

Placement stability is good for children and includes placements of sibling groups. Foster carers demonstrate a real commitment to ensuring that children remain with them and work closely with the staff team to overcome any issues, which may affect placement stability. Imaginative practices support placement stability. Foster carers and the agency identify potential triggers, which may affect placement stability and take proactive action. This has included requesting meetings at the carer's home with education providers to plan for the re-integration of children who have experienced difficulties.

Children feel supported by their foster carers in preparing for independence. Independence workbooks are used by foster carers with young people to plot their competences and work is then done to assist young people to develop skills. Young people develop new skills in such areas as using public transport unaided, making meals and taking responsibility for their own personal needs. There are currently several young people who should have a pathway plan in place who do not. While the formation of such plans is the responsibility of the placing authority, foster carers should contribute to the development and implementation of such plans.

Children contribute fully to how the service is run. A recent consultation event enabled children to express their views about the service and how it could improve. Children will soon be involved in contributing to the assessment and recruitment

processes for foster carers and agency staff. This promotes a sense of inclusion in all aspects of their care. Children have stated their willingness to be part of this development. One young person stated 'it will enable me to help other children who are less fortunate than me, by making sure they get the best possible care.' Children have also completed questionnaires for the agency about the care they receive. These have been shared by the agency with placing authorities and used by the manager as part of their monitoring of the service.

Children take part in a wide range of social activities, which broaden their experiences and outlook on life. Such activities include, gymnastics, horse riding, drama clubs, scouts, guitar lessons and skiing. Children are able to identify activities they enjoy and experience new things during their placements with this agency. The staff team demonstrate a real commitment to listening to what children may want to do and strive to meet their holistic needs whenever possible. Such imaginative and child-focused practice provides children with experiences which help them improve in confidence and self-esteem over time.

Quality of service

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

During its first year in operation the service has recruited a range of foster carers who meet the needs of children to an exceptionally high standard. Involved agencies all consistently report very high levels of satisfaction with the work of the foster carers in improving outcomes for children. Recruitment campaigns are currently underway to further develop and increase the numbers of foster carers. This will include recruitment from within Black and minority ethnic communities. Current staffing levels reflect the diverse needs of the local population and children requiring a service.

The service currently has four active applications being considered and there is a plan to attend a local recruitment event in the area to promote the service and secure more applications. The Registered Manager and staff team are very keen that the service does not expand too widely. They firmly believe in the value of a small, family based service, whose ethos is to be able to provide the best possible quality of care to its children. This view is supported and shared by its foster carers. They feel strongly that the current size of the service enables them to provide a very high quality of care to children. Foster carers receive up to 14 days respite from their caring role each year. This is provided by other approved carers within the service and provides consistency of care for children.

Staff within the service also provide very high levels of support to their foster carers. Carers can call their allocated worker or another member of the team 24-hours a day, seven days a week. Staff demonstrate very high levels of commitment to ensuring that their carers feel supported at all times. Staff make visits to carers out of office hours and offer practical support in caring for children at times of need. This has led to foster carers feeling secure and valued at all times by the staff team. Carers report that such high levels of flexible support have enabled them to maintain

placements at times of crisis and that this contributes to them feeling highly valued.

The carers' assessment and approval process is very robust. Fostering panel minutes clearly reflect the strengths and potential weaknesses of each carer's application and the presenting social worker's report. Panel members appropriately and rigorously question and challenge both carers and applicants before recommending approval of their applications. The agency decision maker is similarly robust and thorough in their determination of all panel papers and minutes. There is a real culture of learning across all areas of the service. The entire staff team demonstrate a real commitment to learning lessons from fostering panel feedback and comments from the agency decision maker. A workshop has been planned for carers, panel members and agency staff to attend in the near future. This will consider the lessons learned from assessments undertaken to date and ensure that further improvements are made to the service. Foster carers and staff all report feeling very much part of the team and take great pride in developing the service.

This has led to them recently making improvements to their assessment formats. The quality and content of such reports is very high and these have been commended by panel members. The fostering panel has a key quality assurance role and has produced detailed feedback to assist the service in making further improvements to the practice. Children have also been actively involved in consultation about how the service runs and can improve. They have attended a recent consultation event with agency staff and panel members and completed consultation questionnaires, seeking their input about foster carers and the care they receive. Work is currently being undertaken by the panel chair and a member of the agency to develop a children's panel. This will further ensure that children contribute fully to the assessment and approval of carers. Children have been asked to express their interest in being part of this; there has been a very high and positive response.

Involved agencies also comment very positively on the matching of foster carers with children. One school stated 'this child is so well placed with their carers, it has been a really positive match and has enabled the child to come on in leaps and bounds over the past year.' The service prides itself on very careful consideration of the needs of children and which foster carers could best meet those needs. Placing authorities report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with the matching process. One social worker stated 'I cannot speak highly enough of the foster carers or the agency staff. The matching of this child to these carers has been excellent and placement stability is excellent because of the time they took to get the right match.'

Foster carers receive monthly supervision to a very high standard. The content of each supervision session ensures that the needs of each child are fully considered and addressed. Carers maintain very detailed recording for each child and share this information with their supervising social workers during supervision. Key information is then passed on to the placing authorities each month. The holistic needs of the child are discussed in each supervision session, with children being spoken with as part of this process. Supervising social workers also take the time to meet and talk with each foster carer's child, in order to elicit their wishes and feelings. One birth child stated how actively involved they felt in being part of a fostering family. They

stated how included they felt, from the point of a potential placement being identified to on-going consultation with them during the placement.

Foster carers have received a wide range of training opportunities over the past year. They all report very high levels of satisfaction at the frequency and content of the training provided to them by the service. One carer stated that the training provided to them by this agency was the best they had ever known in all their years of being a foster carer. Foster carers also feel able to identify any additional training they may need and report total confidence that the agency will pay for and support them to attend. Carers have attended specific specialist training recently, paid for by the agency and this has been attended by agency staff as well. Training is also provided jointly to agency staff, foster carers and panel members. This ensures that learning is shared and discussed across all areas of the service. Agency staff have demonstrated a real commitment to ensuring that meaningful training is provided to their carers throughout the year. This has included commissioning bespoke training events and carers and staff devising and facilitating their own training events. This has included plans for a safeguarding training event, devised and led by a foster carer and supervising social worker.

Agency staff and foster carers ensure that plans for all children are meaningful and meet their needs at all times. Where information has not been provided at the time of the placement commencing all involved staff ensure that missing information is chased and that there is no drift in providing services for children. This has included the agency paying for additional educational tutoring for some children, rather than wait for other agencies to arrange this. Education providers state how impressed they have been with the highly imaginative practices of the agency to meet children's needs. Provision of additional tutoring has enabled children to make noticeable improvements in their education. Children have the potential to move into further education or apprenticeships. Some have secured college placements for this year and foster carers work closely with education providers to ensure that such provision is in place.

Agency staff and foster carers display excellent levels of commitment and imagination in how they work to secure services for children. They have employed the services of independent providers to meet the specific needs of children consistently over the past year. They demonstrate a huge commitment to sourcing and paying for additional services for their children when needed. Such services have included arranging for children to receive first aid training in the near future. This will further increase children's awareness of key health issues and improve their confidence and sense of self-worth. Specific literacy needs for some children have been considered and the agency has employed the services of an independent provider. This attention to detail further leads to improved outcomes for children over time.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

All children placed report feeling safe from bullying and abuse. They report confidence in being able to speak with their foster carers and of action being taken to ensure they are safe from any actual or potential harm. One young person stated 'I was bullied, but this was dealt with by my carers very quickly and has never been an issue again.' Children report high levels of satisfaction about the support they receive. They have no concerns about the care provided to them and state how well they get on with all agency staff. Supervising social workers in the agency develop meaningful relationships with the children over time and ensure that they spend time talking with them and take on board their views. Children speak with confidence of being able to talk to various people if they have any concerns. Children also know how to make a complaint if they had any worries about their placements. Monthly supervision sessions with foster carers have a specific focus on safeguarding and this ensures that any concerns are recorded and responded to. There have been no reported complaints from children since the agency began operating last year. Children have been provided with a copy of the children's guide. This contains clear information for them about how to make a complaint and it has the contact details for relevant agencies.

The assessment and approval processes for foster carers are rigorous and fully consider safeguarding and child protection. The agency ensures that its staff have access to a range of training opportunities which consider these areas. Panel members consider all assessments fully and challenge and question any areas of potential weakness before recommending approval. The quality of assessment reports is very good, with supervising social workers demonstrating good competence and skill in assessing each carer's awareness of safeguarding issues. Foster carers have all received at least one unannounced visit from their supervising social worker. Many have received more than this during the past year. The Registered Manager is committed to ensuring that they exceed the minimum requirements and that carers know that the care they provide will be monitored on a regular basis. Visits always include discussion with children placed, as well as with each foster carer's birth children.

Foster carers demonstrate a detailed understanding of the needs of those children placed with them. They speak with confidence and insight about the histories of the children and how they support them. They ensure that they have full information and work closely with other agencies to assist children deal with the impact of abuse. A mental health professional reported how impressed they were with how the foster carers and Registered Manager worked with them to meet children's needs. They referred to the carers and manager as being 'very tenacious and passionate about ensuring the needs of children are met, of knowing the story for each child and working with them to help their recovery.'

Care plans for each child are fully considered and discussed in each supervision session with foster carers. Carers and staff ensure that plans reflect the current needs of children and that those needs are met and addressed. Carers demonstrate a detailed knowledge and understanding of the impact abuse has had on children in their care. Risk assessments and strategies are in place and are clearly recorded which provides security for children. Safe caring plans include detailed and

meaningful information to further protect both carers and children. Supervising social workers ensure that foster carers maintain detailed records of the work they do with children to ensure their on-going safety. Social workers report high levels of satisfaction about being provided with detailed records of significant events in a timely manner.

Carers and agency staff respond efficiently to any incidents of children going missing from their placements. Local joint protocols are followed and the incidence of children going missing has decreased over the past year. Carers and staff work closely to identify triggers for such behaviours and make plans to support children. Such proactive and timely responses have led to a reduction in concerning behaviours; this evidences the Registered Manager's commitment to monitoring and tracking the service regularly.

Allegations against foster carers are managed in a sensitive and prompt manner by the Registered Manager and staff team. Carers report a clear understanding of the processes to be followed in the event of an allegation being made. The foster carers' handbook contains detailed information on the role of the Local Authority Designated Officer; all have copies of this. Recording of any allegations and complaints is thorough and detailed. The Registered Manager ensures that the agency complaints policy is followed and that internal investigations and outcomes inform future practice for the agency. Complainants report satisfaction with how complaints have been responded to by the Registered Manager. Further training is due to be put on for carers in the near future, to increase their awareness of allegations and their impact.

The agency has recently agreed for some bespoke first aid training to be provided to its looked after children. This will further provide children with an increased awareness of safety issues relating to their health and the health of others. This further demonstrates the agency's commitment and enthusiasm for ensuring that children receive the best possible care and experiences. Carers will be receiving further training on de-escalation techniques and use of restraint in the near future. Use of restraint is minimal and seen as a last resort by all carers.

Leadership and management

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

The Registered Manager demonstrates a very clear vision for the agency and is very committed to ensuring the best possible outcomes for children are achieved. The small size of the agency has enabled the staff team to focus on providing high quality support to its foster carers. Foster carers reported that they like the ethos of this agency because children are placed at the centre of all activities and practices. Carers feel supported at all times by every member of the staff team and feel well prepared for placements.

One social worker stated that the Registered Manager provided monthly reports about children which were 'thorough and instil confidence that she is familiar with

the family and support/strategies required.' Effective partnership working is a key strength of this agency. All agencies, organisations and professionals contacted as part of the inspection had only positive statements to make about the staff team. All those spoken with reported noticeable improvements for children in relation to their educational attainment, social skills and confidence.

The recording and reporting systems used by the agency provide a wealth of information to assist the Registered Manager and staff team to track, monitor and evaluate the services they provide. Information stored is detailed and would assist a child greatly if they were to request access to it in later life. The electronic recording systems enable the staff team to monitor every aspect of a child's needs and progress. All relevant checks, appointments and educational attendance and achievements are recorded for each child placed. Details of any specific needs relating to disability, religion, language or ethnicity are also recorded and used to assist the agency in identifying future targets and objectives.

The Registered Manager has a detailed and comprehensive development plan in place for the agency. This sets out the proposed developments for the service for the coming year and includes training and the arrangements for consultation with children. Consultation of children has taken place at regular intervals during the past year and has shaped how services have been provided. A consultation event was very well attended last year by children, carers, staff and the entire management team. This has been used as the starting point to further ensure the full and meaningful engagement of children in assisting in the assessment and recruitment of future carers. Children report high levels of satisfaction in knowing that their contribution will improve the outcomes for other children.

The agency is hoping to secure an increased number of foster carers over the next twelve months and to include children even more in how the service runs and develops. The plan has clear and realistic objectives set for both short and longer-term development to improve the service. The entire management and staff team have been instrumental in its formation and involved in its implementation. Foster carers have been instrumental in the formation of the foster carers' Charter. This is a meaningful and live document, referred to by carers as underpinning the work they do with the agency.

The agency has robust systems in place to monitor all incidents, accidents and complaints made. The Registered Manager produces detailed monitoring reports on a regular basis and ensures that all relevant notifications are made to involved agencies. The Registered Manager demonstrates a real commitment to ensuring that the matching of children with suitable foster carers is a main priority. This has ensured that placement disruptions have been minimal during the past year. The staff team also demonstrates a real commitment to offering support to its carers to enable placements to thrive. Carers report high levels of satisfaction with the levels of practical and emotional support offered to them by the agency. This is further supported by good quality and accessible respite provision for them.

The management team meets regularly and ensures that carers and children feel

part of all aspects of how the services are shaped and developed. There is very much a family feel to the agency. Every member of the team demonstrates a real commitment to the children in their care. Such dedication and commitment has led, in a relatively short period of time, to increased placement stability, improved outcomes for children and excellent service provision.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.