

New Life Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC447166
Inspection date	18/06/2013
Inspector	Suzanne Young / Clive Lucas
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

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Responsible individual	Kaneez Fatima Choudhry
Date of last inspection	31/05/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency is a privately owned, independent fostering agency. It provides fostering services for looked after children and young people from 0 to 18 years of age and provides a full range of placements. Currently, there is one fostering household with no children and young people in placement. During the inspection, three fostering households with six children in placement were in the process of transferring over to the agency under protocol procedures.

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 **inadequate**.

This is the agency's first inspection since registration in May 2012. The agency has only had two placements during this period. During the inspection several foster carers and children were in the process of transferring from another agency. The fostering manager is currently undergoing registration.

There are serious shortfalls in the leadership and management of the agency which lead to significant concerns regarding the practice, knowledge and integrity of managers. As a result, children and young people's welfare is not adequately safeguarded. Managers' knowledge of fostering and safeguarding procedures is insufficient. Assessments of prospective foster carers are inadequately completed without conducting all necessary safety checks. Staff and foster carer recruitment procedures are also not adequately thorough and robust. Communication between management and staff is confusing. Assessments of prospective foster carers transferring over to the agency are almost identical to their previous assessments which calls into question the fostering manager's integrity.

There is inadequate monitoring of the performance of the agency. Systems to monitor practice and to identify patterns and trends are not adequately developed to improve outcomes for children. Management have not established effective links with partner agencies such as police, the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and health services to ensure good outcomes for children and young people are

achieved.

The agency has recently employed a consultancy firm and an experienced supervising social worker to develop the service. As a consequence, there have been some recent developments to systems, records and procedures which have yet to be tested.

As a result of this inspection, there are ten requirements relating to staff vetting procedures, assessments and approval of prospective foster carers, adequacy of records and the fitness of the fostering manager. In addition, seven recommendations are made.

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
7 (2011)	ensure a person managing the fostering agency is of integrity and good character (Regulation 7(2))	26/07/2013
11 (2011)	ensure the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster carers is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This relates to ensuring the designated officer for child protection has the necessary knowledge and expertise of safeguarding procedures (Regulation 11(a))	26/07/2013
12 (2011)	prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect (Regulation 12)	26/07/2013
18 (2011)	ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it and the outcome of the investigation (Regulation 18(5))	26/07/2013
20 (2011)	ensure that there is full and satisfactory information available to all those seeking to carry on, manage or work for the purposes of a foster service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20(3)(c))	26/07/2013
25 (2011)	ensure the fostering panel consider each application referred to it for approval and take into account all of the information passed to it requesting any other relevant information as the fostering panel considers necessary (Regulation 25(a)(b))	26/07/2013
26 (2011)	carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 and any other information they consider relevant (Regulation 26(1)(2)(a))	26/07/2013
27	enter into an agreement with foster carers which cover all	26/07/2013

(2011)	matters in Schedule 5 (Regulation 27(5)(b) Schedule 5)	
30 (2011)	ensure a record of each placement with the foster parent, including the name, age and sex of each child placed, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstances of the termination (Regulation 30(3))	26/07/2013
35 (2011)	maintain a system for the monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 and improving the quality of foster care provided by the agency. (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b))	26/07/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering service's procedures are compatible with the police and local authority Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocols (RMFCH) (NMS 5.6)
- ensure the children's guides include how children and young people can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer (NMS 16.4)
- ensure each foster carer is appropriately supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker in line with their procedures (NMS 21.8)
- ensure the fostering agency's child protection procedures are submitted for consideration to the Local Authority Children's Board and to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for Child Protection (NMS 22.4)
- ensure the fostering agency's decision-maker is a social worker with at least 3 years post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice (NMS 23.12)
- ensure each panel member's performance, including the panel chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (The Children Act 1989 guidance vol. 4)
- ensure a written record is kept by the fostering service of each supervision held for each member of staff. (NMS 24.5)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **adequate**.

Children and young people receive an adequate level of care that meets their needs. They make attachments with their foster carers and friends who help them begin to develop a positive self-view. Children and young people are generally happy in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. This is confirmed by placing social workers who feel carers and staff generally support children and young people to attend school and feel comfortable in their placements.

Children and young people are supported to share and express their views by their foster carers and by supervising social workers. They are involved in decisions that influence their lives through attending statutory looked-after reviews. Children and young people's views are sought over their day-to-day care because supervising social workers visit and speak with them in their foster homes. The agency support worker also visits young people on a regular and frequent basis to build relationships and develop their independence skills.

Children and young people are supported to keep healthy and are encouraged, where appropriate, to take responsibility for their own health. The success of this, however, has been variable as health appointments with dentists and opticians are not always kept by young people. As a consequence, health issues may go undetected. Young people are encouraged to engage in activities such as attending the gym to develop confidence and self-esteem.

Children and young people are generally making adequate progress and attainment in their education and learning. All young people aged 16 to 18 years access further education, training or apprenticeships. However, attendance is variable which could result in young people not reaching their potential.

Quality of service

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

The quality of service provided to children and young people is inadequate. This is because the recruitment and assessment of foster carers are not adequately robust. For example, until very recently there have not been systems in place to adequately gate-keep enquiries from those seeking to foster. This has meant enquiries from inappropriate applicants have been passed to assessors to begin assessments.

The agency recruits a diverse range of foster carers with differing cultures and backgrounds. Equality and diversity is fully explored in assessments including issues of sexuality and disability. However, the assessments of prospective foster carers and existing foster carers transferring over to the agency are not rigorous or adequately completed. Past allegations have not been explored and two assessments completed by the fostering manager are almost identical to past assessments conducted by a previous agency. This has potentially serious implications for the welfare and safety of any children placed and calls into question the integrity of the fostering manager.

Recommendations made by assessing social workers to panel are not appropriate. For example, foster carers are recommended to approve children aged 0-18 when they are smokers. This is contrary to good practice guidance which dictates that no child under five years of age should be placed with foster carers who smoke. Foster carers are also recommended for approval for bridging and mother and baby placements when they do not have the necessary skills and qualifications in these areas. Sections of the assessments have not been adequately completed or dated, for example carers' address histories and dates of medical assessments. This indicates a lack of awareness of issues or attention to detail that could have a serious

impact on the approvals and appropriateness of placements.

The fostering panel is not adequately robust. Panel minutes are confusing and inaccurate. Panel members have not been adequately scrutinising assessments as gaps in assessments and health and safety checks have not been explored. There are shortfalls in the membership of the fostering panel as there is no-one currently with education experience. This can compromise the decision making process as the education of looked after children and young people are matters which are likely to feature in panel discussion. The agency has, however, recognised this shortfall and is in the process of recruiting more panel members.

The agency does not have any foster carers who have been with them for 12 months. As a consequence no foster carer reviews have been conducted.

Foster carers say they have completed induction and mandatory refresher training. As a result they feel able to adequately care for children and young people placed with them. They feel well supported because supervising social workers visit them on a regular basis. However, formal supervision has not been occurring on a regular basis or in line with the agency's own policy. As a consequence, the agency cannot ensure that good outcomes for children and young people are being achieved.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

There are significant shortfalls in the systems and practices of the agency which potentially places children and young people at risk of significant harm. The recruitment and vetting of adults working for the fostering agency is not adequately thorough and robust. The reason why a person who has left a previous position where their duties involved working with children or vulnerable adults is not always explored. Soft intelligence has not been sought for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks where these have been transferred and references have not been verified.

Significant shortfalls in foster carers' assessments mean children are not adequately safeguarded. Prospective foster carers' assessments have been completed and sent to the fostering panel without seeking overseas certificate of good conduct checks. Health and safety assessments are not adequately completed to ensure the foster home is appropriate and safe for children and young people.

There is not an open staff culture within the agency to adequately safeguard children. Staff have left their employment because they feel their integrity has been compromised. Since registration there have been three anonymous complaints regarding unsafe practices within the agency. Ofsted have visited and these complaints were examined in line with regulation. The outcome of these complaints was inconclusive.

The fostering manager and designated person for safeguarding within the agency, does not have adequate knowledge and understanding of safeguarding procedures to safeguard children and young people. The agency has copies of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) procedures which are accessible to staff, although these have only been available since the inspection was announced. The agency's child protection procedures are inaccurate and have not been submitted for consideration and comment to the LSCB and Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for child protection. They also do not comply with the 2013 Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance. As a consequence, allegations and suspicions of harm may not be handled in a way that provides safe and effective protection for children and young people.

There have been no allegations of or suspicions of harm against children or young people. Instances of young people going missing from home are dealt with appropriately. However, the local authority runaway and missing from home and care protocol is not in place to ensure foster carers and staff take the appropriate action as agreed by the LSCB together with the police.

Leadership and management

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

This is the agency's first inspection since registration. During the period of the inspection no children or young people are living with foster carers. Several foster careers and children are in the process of transferring under protocol from another agency. The fostering manager is currently undergoing registration.

The management of the agency is inadequate. This is due to significant shortfalls in the practice, knowledge and skills of the fostering manager and responsible individual. During the last year two visits have been made to the agency following complaints to Ofsted regarding poor and unsafe practice within the agency. Regulatory shortfalls were found. Following this, a further complaint was made regarding the recruitment processes of prospective foster carers. Communication within the agency between management and staff is unclear and confusing which can result in unsafe practice.

Since May 2013 the agency has employed a consultancy firm to make improvements to the service overall. An experienced supervising social worker has also been employed within the last three weeks. As a consequence, during the last month, systems, records and procedures have been developed and reviewed. Despite these recent developments to the agency's systems and practices, significant shortfalls have been found which impact on the welfare and safety of children and young people.

Regulatory shortfalls raised at the last compliance visit with respect to staff vetting have not been adequately addressed. Current recruitment processes within the agency are still not robust. As a consequence children and young people are not

adequately safeguarded from those who are unsuitable which potentially places them at risk of harm. These are explored under the safeguarding section of this report and demonstrate management's lack of knowledge and ability to comply with regulatory requirements.

The management of the fostering service is inadequate because the fostering manager's knowledge and ability to effectively and safely manage the agency is insufficient. There is a lack of knowledge regarding safeguarding procedures and failure to adequately and safely assess prospective foster carers. This indicates an unacceptable level of safeguarding awareness. Assessments of prospective foster carers transferring over to the agency are almost identical to their previous assessments which calls into question the fostering manager's integrity.

The manager and director have not been adequately monitoring the performance of the agency. Systems to monitor practice issues, which identify patterns and trends and which evidence quality care and outcomes for children are not adequately developed. Records of complaints are not adequately recorded to demonstrate the action taken in response to the complaint and the outcome of the investigation. Managers have not established effective links with other agencies such as police, LADO and health services to ensure good outcomes for children and young people are achieved. As a consequence children and young people's welfare may be compromised.

Staff receive regular supervision. However this is not always recorded to demonstrate and develop learning and practice. Panel members are not receiving annual appraisals to ensure their performance is of the required standard. This can compromise the care offered to children and young people.

The knowledge and experience of the agency decision maker is not adequate to ensure good quality decisions are taking place. As a consequence children may be placed in inappropriate and unsafe placements.

The quality of the agency's records is inadequate. The service has a foster carer handbook, a Statement of Purpose and two children's guides which are clear and accessible to all ages. However, the children's guides do not include how they can contact their independent reviewing officer. This could affect a child or young person being able to adequately make a concern. There is not a record of each placement on the foster carer's file in line with regulation. The foster carer agreement does not specifically state the requirement for foster carers to comply with the agency's behaviour management and safeguarding policies as required. This potentially places children and risk of harm and demonstrates the lack of knowledge by management to comply with regulation.

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.