

Connect Fostering Services Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC465868
Inspection date	05/12/2014
Inspector	Sandra Jacobs-Walls
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Hyde Park 5th Floor, 11 Millington Road, Hayes, Middlesex, UB3 4AZ
Telephone number	07946633817
Email	kiransirpal@yahpp.co.uk
Registered person	Connect Fostering Services Ltd
Registered manager	Winston Anthony McKenzie
Responsible individual	Kiranjit Sirpal
Date of last inspection	10/07/2013

© Crown copyright 2014

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Connect Fostering Service Ltd is an independent fostering agency that registered with Ofsted in July 2013. The fostering service specialises in providing foster care placements for individual and sibling group placement, emergency and short and long term placements. The agency also provides parent and child placements.

The company has a group of directors which includes the Responsible Individual of the fostering service. The agency's aim is to 'provide safe caring and supportive placements for children and young people that will enable them to achieve positive life outcomes'.

At the time of the inspection the fostering agency had 8 approved fostering households with 8 children/young people in placement.

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: **good**.

This fostering service registered with Ofsted in July 2013 and this is the service's first inspection since registration. The fostering service has made a very promising start in meeting the placement needs for children and young people. The service provides good quality of care, and the outcomes for children and young people are positive. Looked After Children receive personalised care that meets their individual needs and

they are kept safe. The service pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity.

The fostering agency has many strengths including excellent support and supervision provided to foster carers. Managers and staff have extensive experience of the fostering task, child protection, and children's residential care. Staff and foster carers demonstrate a keen commitment to providing quality care to children and young people. There are recruitment strategies in place and strong procedures in place to support the assessment process.

Safeguarding practice is at the heart of this fostering agency. There are effective systems in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. Thorough assessments of foster carer's skills are conducted, risk assessments and safer care plans are carried out. These ensure that children and young people's welfare is promoted and that they are kept safe.

The leadership and management of the fostering service are strong. The Responsible Individual and Registered Manager are both qualified and experienced social workers, who have managed fostering services previously. The fostering service provides all interested parties with detailed information about the service and facilities provided, Managers ensure that all key policies are in place, safeguarding policies and procedures are comprehensive. Foster carers' training opportunities are good and the service's fostering panel operates effectively.

This inspection notes some shortfalls. The service's children's guides require revision, the service's matching form is not sufficiently comprehensive and some documented behavioural management plans require updating. The fostering service is yet to appoint a representative of child health to its fostering panel and the service requires a greater pool of approved foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people referred.

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
4 (2011)	keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the children's guide. (Regulation 4(a))	02/03/2015

Recommendations

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

- provide children with information about the foster carers before their arrival and ensure this information is in a format appropriate to children's age and understanding (NMS 11.3)
- ensure the fostering service implements an effective strategy to ensure sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands of the service (NMS13.1)
- ensure that the skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to make competent recommendations. In particular that a representative from child health is recruited to the fostering panel (NMS 14.8)
- ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly. In particular that the matching form is explicit about how matching decisions are made and that behaviour management plans are appropriately updated. (NMS 26.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people benefit from the service's strong focus in promoting good outcomes for Looked After Children. Their overall experiences while in placement are positive. There are clear policies in place that outline the fostering service's complaints procedure. Children and young people understand how complaints are made; no complaints have been received from looked after children. The fostering service has developed feedback forms for the use of children and young people who are in placement to solicit their views about the service. Young people can participate in the development of the service, ensuring it promotes positive outcomes for them. Staff ensure that they regularly meet with children and young people in private to further ensure opportunities are provided to share their views about the placement and ideas for service development.

Children and young people benefit from the service's careful placement negotiation and placement start. Introductions between Looked After Children and their prospective foster carers are carefully and sensitively co-ordinated. This helps settle children and young people into their new surroundings and supports a positive placement start. The fostering service is yet to develop systems to share clear, age-appropriate information about the foster family selected to care for children and young people. This will further enhance the introductory process.

Children and young people benefit from personalised care provided by the fostering service in accordance with the placing authority's care plan. Children enjoy sound relationships with their foster carers, who clearly enjoy caring for them. Children and young people receive very individualistic care that addresses well any identity issues. This is crucial in ensuring that young people have a good understanding of their heritage and history.

Children and young people have good access to family members, friends and others when it is safe for them to do so. Arrangements for contact are carefully managed by the fostering agency with a consistent focus on the impact and the best interest of children and young people. They have access to information written about them by the fostering service.

Children and young people live in a healthy environment where their physical, emotional and social well-being is promoted. They have excellent access to primary health care services and receive advice and support from specialist services where this is required, for example ante-natal services. In relation to their emotional health, children and young people also have good access to mental health professionals such as clinical psychologists for mental health assessments and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for on-going support and counselling. Documented health care plans and health care passports ensure that children and young people gain the advice, support and treatment they need, when they need it. They enjoy well-balanced, nutritious diets, which meet their cultural and religious needs.

Children and young people engage in a range of physical and social activities that are of their choosing. These typically include sport, attendance at local youth clubs and gyms, air and army cadets and drama programmes. Many enjoy family holidays with their foster families. These activities assist children and young people to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and good play opportunities.

The agency is very active in promoting education, and this has a positive impact on children and young people's educational attainment. The fostering service reports that 100% of children and young people attend school or college, their attendance and academic achievements noticeably improves as their placement progresses.

Older young people have the opportunity to develop practical life skills to prepare them for independent living. Young people develop skills in money management, cooking, completing laundry and other household tasks. These skills are essential to prepare young people for adult life. The fostering service has in place clear 'Staying Put' policies to support former looked after children in their existing foster care placements.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service has been registered with Ofsted since July 2013 and currently has 8 approved fostering households. The service continues to build upon its efforts to recruit more foster carers to offer a diverse range of foster care placement. At the time of the inspection there are a number of foster care assessments underway. The service is yet to approve foster carers offering for example specialist remand foster care placements or placements for children living with disabilities as outlined in the service's statement of purpose. Further expansion of the agency's pool of approved foster carers will better enable the fostering service to meet the diverse needs of

Looked After Children it seeks to serve.

The fostering service ensures prospective foster carers are robustly assessed to ensure they are able to care safely for children and young people. The preparation of applicants is thorough and conducted with appropriate depth and rigor. Foster care assessments are comprehensive, analytical and identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. All assessments and approvals are completed within eight months of the foster carers' application. Foster carers are clear about their role and the roles of the agency and local authority.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and benefits by having a membership drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work that is presented at panel meetings. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and there are occasional training opportunities for those on the fostering service's central list. The central list is yet to include a representative of child health. This is important to ensure panel deliberations include an expert opinion from this field.

The fostering services matching process is effective. Children and foster carers benefit from clear and comprehensive written guidance with regards to this process. Recording tools however are not explicit in identifying how matching decisions are made and how any gaps are to be met. Staff are careful to ensure that the service and foster carers receive detailed information about the specific needs of children seeking placements. The service ensures foster carers have the required knowledge, skill and expertise to meet the needs of children prior to placements being negotiated. This ensures that effective placements are made that meet the needs of looked after children. The fostering service's matching process carefully considers issues of individual identity. This includes matters relating to culture, race, religion and implications for safe caring.

Foster carers receive excellent support from staff through regular visits, telephone calls, supervision and support groups. Foster carers feel highly valued within the agency. Foster carers feel a key strength of the agency is the support they receive to achieve positive outcomes for children and young people. All feedback received from foster carers has been extremely positive. Carers are equally positive about the training they receive, including that which occurs pre-approval. One foster carer comments of the agency's training, 'There's loads of it! Training is quality, interesting, you get involved. There's group work and role play. It's all very interactive'. The overall training programme available to foster carers is good in meeting their needs and ensuring they are able to offer good quality care.

Staff's support and supervision of foster carers is excellent. Foster carers' communication with staff of the service is frequent and meaningful; staff make themselves available to support foster carers emotionally and practically. The agency has an effective out-of-hours service, staffed by managers. Staff maintain consistent records of formal supervisory visits that focus on placement progress and issues. This is important to ensure that the needs of children remain paramount throughout the duration of the placement. One foster carer comments, 'It's like being in a family

- you're not just a foster carer or a number. You matter and the level of support here is brilliant'.

Foster carers understand explicitly the importance of working in partnership with the fostering service and other professionals and do so well. This ethos is promoted in agency literature and training. Foster carers confirm and case files evidence the effective partnership working between staff, foster carers and other involved professionals such as the child's social worker and educational experts. This is important to ensure that all professionals are appropriately informed of placement progress and issues and participate in decision-making about children's lives. One local authority representative says of the service, 'Communication with staff at Connect is good. Emails are regular and we talk. I can't fault them; they came up with the business. They provided X with an excellent placement. She's not absconded since; she's back in education and engages with her foster carer. All other IFA's declined to accept this placement. It really is working'.

Children and young people's care plans are well adhered to by all parties and statutory reviews are convened at appropriate intervals. This assists in exploring placement issues and progress and helps to minimise unnecessary placement drift and promote permanency.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service views effective safeguarding as a priority for all placements and has this ethos at the centre of its function and operation. The service acknowledges and accepts the particular vulnerability faced by children looked after and staff, managers and foster carers are committed to keeping children and young people safe. Looked after children benefit from the fostering services clear and comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Foster carers receive good written guidance and training to assist them to keep children safe from harm and abuse. Children and young people understand how to make complaints.

Staff ensure that every fostering household has a safe caring policy. In addition, child specific safe caring policies are also in place. This ensures that all parties are clear about house rules, boundaries and systems to help minimise risk. Foster carers and staff demonstrate a keen commitment to and awareness of the importance of keeping children and young people safe while in placement. This is high on the agenda of the agency. Children and young people in placement do not generally exhibit challenging and risk taking behaviour; absconding from placement is rare. The service has clear and comprehensive policies and procedures to address undesired behaviour. Staff and foster carers are very familiar with these protocols and take appropriate action, when required. Staff ensure that individual children and young people have documented risk assessments on file. Staff ensure case records are explicit in highlighting known or suspected risks and identify strategies to minimise these risks. Records are detailed, but some require updating as presenting

behaviour becomes more challenging.

The fostering service is proactive in ensuring there is effective partnership working with regard to child protection enquiries. There is purposeful and consistent liaison with involved professionals including the Local Authority Designated Officer. Staff attend and make valuable contributions to professional and strategy meetings that explore child protection issues. Where incidents of a child protection nature or allegations are made, the service effectively and consistently acts in accordance with agreed safeguarding protocols to ensure children and young people's safety remains the primary objective.

Staff and foster carers have access to clear policies and procedures when children and young people are absent without permission or are deemed 'missing' from their placement. These protocols are clear and well understood by all parties. There are infrequent instances of young people going missing or absent without permission. Where this does occur, young people are spoken to about the dangers of not remaining in placement; messages from staff and foster carers are strong and consistent. Foster carers and staff maintain good records of incidents when young people are missing and of the action taken.

The fostering service's management of allegations is sound. Staff and foster carers have access to comprehensive written guidance and the organisation is effective in its monitoring and management of allegations. Two allegations have been made against foster carers since the start of the service's operation. Subsequent investigations have been robust, and sensitively managed in accordance with written policies and procedures. The fostering service has a designated child protection officer, who ensures that investigations are handled fairly, promptly and consistently. The fostering service ensures, where allegations have been made against foster carers, that these cases are promptly brought before the fostering panel for decision-making about re-approval. Foster carers receive clear information about support available to them in the event of an allegation being made and all approved foster carers have access to advice and information via an independent fostering support body.

The fostering service has good systems in place for staff vetting and recruitment. These processes are well-organised and comprehensive. The organisation ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that staff, members of the central list and students are suitable to work with children and young people. Unannounced visits are undertaken at least annually and children and young people are seen without their foster carer, to gain their views. The fostering service has a whistle blowing policy which is well publicised.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This fostering service has been in operation for 15 months at the time of the inspection. Leaders of the service are ambitious for change, and many aspects of the

fostering service's leadership and management are sound. The service has an ambitious, yet realistic development plan in place to improve practice further and set the future direction and expansion of the fostering service. Leaders and managers are well qualified and experienced to manage the service efficiently and with positive effect. Both the Registered Manager and the Responsible Individual, together with the agency's second director are qualified social workers and have previous experience of running and managing other independent fostering agencies. As a leadership and management team, they are committed to delivering a quality service to children, young people and foster carers.

The fostering service is efficiently managed with effective management structures in place. There are clear lines of accountability. The fostering service's monitoring of referrals, matching, assessments processes and foster carer reviews and placement progress is highly effective. Looked after children and foster carers clearly benefit from this high level of scrutiny. Social work staff are qualified and experienced; the team are highly skilled, motivated and industrious. Managers and staff work cohesively together in the interest of looked after children and placements they are responsible for. A staff member comments, 'I feel fortunate to be in this team, it's very supportive and managers don't just care about the business, but truly about families'.

The fostering service has good monitoring systems in place, which are effective. These include for example, the close tracking of individual children and young people's progress and outcomes, particularly in relation to their health and educational progress. Managers complete quarterly overview reports to the organisation's directors and consistently produce quality of care reports as required by the regulations. As a consequence, leaders have good insight into the quality of the operation and functioning of the fostering service, including areas for improvement.

The fostering service is adequately resourced and is financially viable. Plans to recruitment of additional support and administrative staff is good illustration of the service's capacity to invest and develop while continuing to offer a quality service. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to enable the fostering service to meet its aims and objectives.

The agency maintains excellent communication with looked after children's social workers and foster carers are appreciative of this. The fostering services commitment to effective partnership working with placing authorities acts to enhance successful foster care placements.

Stakeholders and interested parties have access to comprehensive information that outlines well the aims and objectives of the fostering service. The agency's statement of purpose is an informative document that is explicit about what services and facilities it aims to provide. The fostering service's two children's guides are a useful summary of the agency's aim, objectives and services. Both documents require revision to better ensure the information is geared towards the use of children and young people. The children's guides are also available in symbolic form, so

information is available to children and young people who access information thorough alternative methods of communication.

The learning and development of foster carers is good; training opportunities are varied and relevant to help foster carers provide quality care. Staff are equally well supported through training, regular supervision, and reflective practice. They are appropriately qualified and have access to specialist advice and support.

The fostering service complies fully with the regulations with regard to the notification of significant events to appropriate bodies. Foster carers are keenly aware of the need to alert the agency to any significant event; the organisation has effective systems to ensure bodies, such as the local authority, the police and Ofsted are promptly and appropriately informed of significant events.

The fostering agency is clearly very well organised, and is highly functional. The service has a clear vision for its developmental path and demonstrates a commitment to ensuring the outcomes for children and young people are positive. The service has realistic plans in place to support its efforts to continue to offer quality care and enhance continued improvements to 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, 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.