

Ideal Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Rachel Ruth Britten
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Provision subtype	Agency performing the function(s) of LAs

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Ideal Fostering initially registered in 2009. It re-registered as a private limited company in January 2014.

The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The range of placement types provided include emergency, long term, medium term, short term and parent and child placements. During 2013, 51 new carers and 3 new staff were recruited. At 31 March 2014 there were 122 foster carers across 75 households. There were 91 children living in foster placements.

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**.

Overall the fostering agency has grown significantly and has improved since it was last inspected in November 2010. It is good at making and maintaining successful and stable foster placements. Children and young people, including sibling groups and many with complex needs and/or learning difficulties, have their welfare safeguarded and promoted. Unplanned endings are very rare and much below the national average. As a result, children and young people thrive in safe and stable placements, enjoying relationships that are nurturing and positive

Effective recruitment and preparation of foster carers means that there are a range

of skilled foster carers. These carers can ably meet the diverse needs of the children and young people to whom the agency offers placements. A significant number of carers have recently left other fostering agencies to join this one. A key strength lies in the accurate, focused and analytical assessments of foster carers which are completed in a timely way.

Foster carers demonstrate good knowledge and experience of individual children and young people. They use this effectively as part of the team around the child, playing a key role in planning and decision making. Foster carers clearly benefit from professional and supportive relationships with agency support social workers and agency leaders and managers. As a result, children and young people are well safeguarded and make good progress.

Despite recent growth, the views and experiences of children, young people and foster carers are regularly sought and continue to influence agency developments and strategic thinking. Effective relationships with partner organisations are also demonstrated through positive and child-centred feedback received from these partners. As a result, the agency is very confident in the quality of care and safeguarding being provided to children and young people.

The agency was re-registered in January 2014 following a change to limited company status, but has retained the same responsible individual and Registered Manager since its initial registration in 2009. The consistent leadership of the agency is visible and available to carers and is very effective overall. This is borne out in good staff and carer retention rates which ensure a consistently good service. However, agency social workers feel that irregular communication from leaders and managers sometimes creates unnecessary tensions.

There are some infrequent, minor breaches of national minimum standards relating to the quality of service. These give rise to a number of recommendations following this inspection. However, there are shortfalls which have no impact on the agency's good quality safeguarding and promotion of children's welfare.

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 are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure that support and training is made available to 'hard to reach' carers. This specifically means those carers who do not currently take part in regular supervision and training (NMS 20.8)
- ensure that information is recorded in a way which is helpful to a child and that

they are actively encouraged to read files and add personal statements (NMS 26.6)

- ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of the action taken and the decisions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file and a copy provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded (NMS 22.7)
- clarify and improve the management and support of staff, including understanding to whom they are accountable. This is with particular respect to increasing the opportunities for reflective practice; open communication from leaders and managers about trends and patterns in the quality of care and outcomes for children; the agency's current agenda for improvement and development; and transparency about potential conflicts of interest and planned changes (NMS 24.2)
- ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings clearly cover the key issues and views of members and record the reasons for its recommendation. This applies specifically to recommending continuing approval of foster carers at their first review. (NMS 14.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people have a wide range of opportunities, support and help to enable them to achieve the best possible outcomes. They mature successfully to adulthood and develop a positive identity. Carers comments about children include: 'they can now tell the time and their concentration has improved'; and 'they can now make their own way to school, go shopping with their friends and are responsible enough to make small meals and lunch.' Many children are placed long term with their carers and they are able to stay with them under permanency arrangements. For example, one young person has started a business, learnt to drive and got a car. He has also trained to be a back-up carer for the other foster children in the household when their carer is away.

All children and young people enjoy a good experience of education, taking into account their needs and starting points. For example, three siblings from overseas are progressing well in school, behaving well and learning English quickly with additional support hours within school. A 10 year old has made a whole academic level of progress in reading and is now on track. A young person who attended a pupil referral unit prior to placement is now full time at high school and aiming for results which will enable her to train as a social worker. All children and young people benefit from carers' commitment and support with their education. One child said: 'they (my carers) constantly make me do homework, which is not a bad thing because it gives me a good reputation at school.' Another child said: 'they show a massive interest in my school and come to everything.'

Children and young people are offered effective emotional support and this enables them to mature and take responsibility for their behaviour. Carers say how children have built up confidence and have become open to talk about their problems. One carer's own child said: 'My mum has made the fostered child the great kid he is today by giving him a good family life with love and care.' Emotional support from carers ensures that children understand the reasons why their care plan is as it is. For example, carers suggested a young child made a paper plate face of each family member she was saying goodbye to and held a family meal to mark the goodbye occasion. A carer said that children placed, 'have made incredible improvements with regard to their social and behavioural problems; they are both calmer and able to deal with issues without the aggression and fierceness that we used to see.' Another carer said a child, 'now works along with a behaviour chart, with very good results.'

Children and young people looked after lead an active life and their health improves. Children say, 'it's fun and peaceful, there's lots of activities going on'; and 'I like living here because they look after me well and we go out and I like the house, pool/snooker table, table tennis and lots of things to do.' One young person said she loves the way she can talk to her carer about anything: 'She draws me pictures about how stuff works; girlie stuff.' Another child is now discharged from the hearing specialist because grommets fitted have worked, while another child no longer needs to wear an eye patch and is wearing their glasses. A carer reports that her foster child's fitness has improved and 'she experiences less night terrors now, feeling secure now for the male carer to comfort her too.' One child said, 'They have helped me develop my confidence sporting-wise and helped a lot when I moved into the family.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering agency recruits a wide range of foster carers, who can meet the diverse needs of children and young people. Carers come from diverse ethnic origins and many are able to offer care to sibling groups and disabled children. Most carers are located in areas which are accessible to children's original homes, particularly when there are plans for continuing contact and/or possible rehabilitation home. Carers demonstrate a good understanding of the significance and complexity of birth family relationships and work well with families and social workers to support care plans. The agency also ensures that full information is effectively shared, both regarding the child and the carers. As a result, children are well matched with carers and make good progress despite their complex needs and challenging behaviour.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers focus on the needs of children and young people. As a result, carers understand their role and those of the local authority and fostering agency. Comments from carers include: 'training is always delivered professionally'; 'the fostering agency is very supportive, and we get regular appraisals'; 'they are always ready to support us and offer tailored training sessions at our request'; and 'I have used the out-of-hours service and found this very valuable and often management are quick to support, advice and

deal with queries.' As a result of good overall training and support, carers stay with the agency and the children and young people placed with them make good progress. However, approximately one quarter of carer households have not completed their training and development standards within a year of becoming carers for the agency. In addition, many 'second' carers working outside the home do not attend carer supervision or attend post-approval and/or specific training about the individual needs of children placed. These two areas of shortfall are currently the subject of concerted efforts by the agency. In practice they do not reduce the consistency of care or the effectiveness of placements, but they have significant potential to do so.

Foster carers work very effectively together with children's social workers and other professionals. This ensures that placements are appropriate, planned and meet the needs of children well. For example, carers are positive about the way their delegated authority to make decisions about their fostered child is working. This includes being able to efficiently review specific changes with social workers, so that children's care is best supported. In addition, local authority social workers are impressed with the life story work that children are doing with carers and the team work with other professionals that has secured an individualised education arrangement to meet one young person's need. One social worker said: 'The child's journey in care remains so positive and the outcome for them will be outstanding; the carer's good reputation reflects on the agency.' Mental health professionals also commend the skills of carers to help children empathically and sensitively when they show distress and confusion leading to testing behaviours. Independent reviewing officers remark on the quality of carers whom they meet in reviews of looked after children. However, most carers do not undertake reflective recording or actively encourage children to read and contribute to their records in a way which is helpful to them. This shortfall is a missed opportunity for carers to add to their already skilful work with children and young people.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements because it works effectively alongside the fostering agency. It carries out a rigorous quality assurance function and ensures that assessments, support and training for foster carers are thorough. Panel members have the knowledge and expertise to make child-centred and effective recommendations to the agency decision maker. The panel reviews carers both after one year and four years' work, allowing them continuing oversight of established carers. This provides valuable context and insight into the quality of the agency over time. However, the panel do not set out in writing their reasons for recommending the continued approval of carers at their first annual review. This means that for some carers, shortfalls or potential issues identified in the panel minutes are not evaluated alongside carers' positive contribution to the children placed with them.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation, supervision and training of foster carers

all have a clear focus on safeguarding and child protection. All staff, panel members and carers are safely recruited and trained in child protection. Checks are also undertaken on all adults living or working in carer households. Carers practice safe care and agency staff ensure that they make unannounced visits to foster homes. Staff also ensure that they see children and young people without their foster carers, both in the foster home and at occasional outings and groups laid on by the agency. Children's written feedback is also sought via questionnaires. As a result, children and young people feel safe in their foster homes and are confident that they are supported, listened to and that their concerns will be addressed.

Any allegations against carers are followed up in line with local authority safeguarding procedures. There is, cooperation and information sharing with the Local Authority Designated Officer, social workers and police. Carers' suitability to foster is re-considered by the panel in these circumstances to ensure that the reasons for continued registration are evidenced. Lessons learnt in individual cases are shared with carers, staff and panel members. For example, the agency now ensures that back-up carers are adequately prepared; that carers have training to support children with challenging behaviour; and that respite care is carefully matched. As a result, the agency is good at ensuring that all children and young people are well safeguarded. However, summaries of allegations, the actions taken about them, and the outcome of the investigations, have not been prepared or provided to carers by the agency. This means that carers are not able to produce written evidence of the circumstances and outcome of allegations that have been made against them.

Children and young people are helped by their carers to take age-appropriate risks and develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. Carers are also fully aware of, and sensitive to, potential and actual abuse in children's lives. Carers therefore teach children and young people about safe and appropriate relationships as relevant to their individual needs and situations. This might involve teaching children about the risks associated with going missing; having an interest in stranger adult males; some family contact situations; use of internet/mobiles; or answering the door alone. Carers help children learn to take some manageable risks, perhaps crossing the road alone or walking alone to a dance class. As a result, children and young people enjoy living in their foster homes, say they feel safe there and seldom go missing. A seven year old said, 'I feel like I am in a safe place; I love them all'. A young person said, 'my carer helps me with friendships, relationships and being safe on the phone and internet.'

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leaders and managers have high expectations for children and young people who are fostered. They play an active and direct role in some children's and young people's care, by being available to carers out of hours and in times of crisis. One carer said, 'when things were getting too much for us the agency listened and tried to resolve our concerns.' Another said, 'our relationship with management is very

positive; they were available on the phone when our boy absconded from home and were very supportive.'

Overall, leaders and managers effectively monitor the experience and progress of, all children and young people. This is done through methodical eliciting of feedback from all children and young people, carers, social workers and schools. Managers know from analysing this feedback that the agency is continuously improving and that the outcomes for children and young people are very good. They are also prioritising the completion of training and development standards for carers and to ensure that carer annual reviews are timely. However, the messages from feedback and monitoring are not shared regularly with agency support social workers. This is a missed opportunity to increase staff morale and promote a mutual sense of identity and shared objectives within the agency.

Leaders and managers have developed highly effective working relationships with placing authorities. Staff and managers have a clear understanding of the needs of their looked after children and ensure that placing authorities see demonstrable progress for every child and young person who is fostered. Commissioners say: 'The agency has bucked the trend and has taken a lot of children who are complex. The agency's carers have very few practice issues arising compared to the number of placed children.' Similarly, a social worker said, 'the supervising social worker I have direct dealings with is excellent and her work exemplary.' Overall, a number of placing authorities are increasingly referring children and young people who need an ethnic match with their foster carers, have complex developmental needs, and/or need to be placed with their brothers and sisters.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. This means that the agency is well staffed, resourced and financially viable. Staff turnover is low and staff enjoy protected caseloads. They access some good quality training, for example, on up-to-date approaches to the assessment of carers. Carers and children benefit from the quality of the support they receive. One household said, 'we would both like to acknowledge the outstanding support we have received from you all in supporting us to continue caring for our foster child. Your comments and actions have been very much appreciated and have made a huge difference to the day-to-day support we give.'

However, supervising social workers feel that the quality of manager communication to them requires improvement. At times, they are unclear about the development plans of the agency and are unsure who on the leadership team to go to about different concerns. Some staff feel that there is too little value attached to reflective practice and sharing practice lessons from work that has gone well or less well. Despite this, staff say the agency is professional in its approach and always has the welfare of foster children and carers at its heart. One staff member said, 'it is a pleasure to work with foster carers who are committed and passionate about their role. Having the opportunity to see the progress children and young people have made is extremely rewarding.'

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.