

The Together Trust Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC031288
Inspection date	10 March 2008
Inspector	Sue Winson
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	5 September 2006

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

The Together Trust is an independent fostering agency which provides care on a short and medium to long-term basis for children of all ages, including babies, siblings groups and adolescents. The agency also offers disability placements. Fees vary according to the type of placement and the care package provided.

Summary

This is a good service with some outstanding aspects. The managers, staff and foster carers are committed to meeting the needs of young people and supporting them to achieve positive outcomes. The agency works in conjunction with other agencies and professions as necessary and there is a focus on working in partnership with parents. Education is valued and achievement promoted. Young people, foster carers and social workers are asked for their views on how the services provided. The agency is generally well managed and has a range of staff and foster carers with suitable skills and qualifications. The agency works with local authorities to gain full, written information about children and young people, with varying degrees of success. Foster placement agreements have yet to be compiled for all placements.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

Two requirements made at the last inspection have been acted upon, as have the majority of recommendations. There is now a suitably qualified and experienced manager in place who is registered with Ofsted and improved monitoring systems are in place. The agency now has sufficient staff who have clear roles and lines of accountability have been clarified. Staff receive regular supervision. Risk assessment and risk management planning has been developed further, as has leaving care planning and life skills work with young people. In addition the agency has implemented guidance and training for foster carers on the administration of medication and extended foster carer training to better meet the needs of young people in their care. There is now a dedicated member of staff for publicity and recruitment and the agency uses an independent chairperson for foster carer reviews. The role of the support workers has been developed further.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Problems with gaining full health information from placing social workers persists. However, the agency can demonstrate that they are monitoring this and repeatedly requesting the missing information. Supervising social workers are active in trying to gain full information at the referral stage and foster carers who have good relationships with social workers are empowered to request the information themselves. The agency can demonstrate that children's health needs are met and healthy living promoted. They have regular health, dental and optical checks and health assessments. The agency advocates on their behalf to ensure that specialist health services are available to meet assessed needs. Evidence in supervisory visit reports of positive outcomes for young people. A policy is in place to ensure that young people live in smoke free environments and are informed about the dangers of smoking, drug and substance abuse. Improved systems for foster carers recording and informing the agency of administration of

medication allows for better management monitoring. Foster carers have guidance on the safe storage of medication and who is required to give consent.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The managers and staff are suitably qualified and experienced and have a range of skills. Full checks are carried out on staff prior to them starting work for the agency. Systems are in place to ensure that foster carer's checks and references are gained, updated and include people in the household over 16. Referee interviews demonstrate that these are people who know the applicants well. Health and safety assessments and safe caring strategies are compiled, reviewed and monitored. Assessments of potential foster carers are comprehensive and their ability to meet children's needs is monitored through supervisory visits and reviews. Unannounced visits take place. Effective use of risk assessments and risk management planning is evident. Child specific assessments are compiled, reviewed and updated as necessary. Policies and procedures for safeguarding young people are in place and the agency notifies all appropriate people. Staff and foster carers are trained in child protection and safe caring. Management systems ensure that significant events are monitored. Positive behaviour management strategies are employed in line with the agency's training for foster carers. Where appropriate, the Together Trust's behaviour management trainer works with individual foster carers, for example, when foster carers are using physical interventions, which is unusual in this agency. The recording of these interventions is not always complete. The agency cannot demonstrate robust matching considerations for all placements. Foster placement agreements, which outline areas where foster carers need additional support to compensate in gaps in matching, are not all in place. Placements have been made outside of foster carers' approval status. The agency has a history of effective scrutiny and consideration by its fostering panels. They are properly constituted and include people with a variety of relevant experience. Members of panel have been subject to necessary checks. Minutes demonstrate that the panels exercise effective scrutiny and have a quality assurance function. Panel members have undertaken training.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency values diversity and promotes educational achievement. The agency can demonstrate that children and young people's ethnic, cultural and religious needs are met. Quality and diversity is considered in their training and policies. A recent event on African culture was enjoyed by young people and achieved its aim of raising awareness in a fun way. A multiple heritage course is provided for carers and workers know about local resources. The service promotes educational achievement. Foster carers work closely with schools to encourage young people to attend and achieve. Staff and foster carers advocate for appropriate education provision and additional assistance on behalf of the young people. Foster carers attend school meetings and events. Children and young people are making progress in education and their attendance is high. The agency works with the education staff of the Together Trust and provides training for foster carers to enhance their abilities to support young people in education. Children and young people enjoy a range of activities according to their interests and wishes which widen their experiences and enhance their self confidence.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency can demonstrate that contact is promoted. Examples were given where foster carers and support workers are involved in contact arrangements and where possible, work in partnership with parents for the benefit of the young people. Young people are consulted by the agency through a range of means including participation days. Supervising social workers see them on their visits, children contribute to their statutory reviews and are given information on complaining. There is an expectation that foster carers go through supervision reports with young people. Where young people do not want to receive questionnaires, their wishes are respected. Placing social workers have been positive in their comments on the care received by children and young people, both in the agency's end of placement reports and in surveys completed for this inspection. Foster carers are consulted in a variety of ways including their forum, support groups and individually. Despite this, some foster carers do not feel they were consulted about recent changes in respite arrangements and have made their views known to the agency, who invited them to a meeting to discuss. The manager maintains a complaints monitoring file which demonstrates appropriate actions taken in line with policies and procedures, including independent investigation where relevant.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The service can demonstrate that children and young people are developing age-appropriate life skills and being prepared for adulthood. Life skills work has been formalised by the use of living skills questionnaires from five years old, in age bands which assesses children's and young people's skills and areas for development. These are used to build on skills and serve to provide guidance to foster carers and support workers. Training is provided for foster carers. Young people are being given information about options for their future. Effective payment systems are in place which ensure that foster carers receive the agreed allowances and expenses regularly.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose which clearly outlines its aims and objectives and the services provided. Children's guides are informative and appropriate. The agency has qualified, skilled and experienced managers and fostering team members who are supported by an efficient administrative team and effective systems. Work has clearly been done since the new management team has been in post to encourage cohesion and cooperative working in the team. Supervising social workers and support workers have a wide range of skills and relevant experiences and are appropriately qualified. Staff are positive about the knowledge and skills of managers who support and supervise them effectively and who are available and accessible for advice and guidance. Appraisals and personal development plans are happening and professional development is encouraged. Policies and procedures are in place which guide staff in their work and there are job descriptions which reflect roles and responsibilities. Lines of accountability are clear. An improved focus on recruitment and targeting advertising has been achieved by the addition of a specific worker to take on this role. A recruitment strategy is in place based on needs of the agency, monitored through child referrals. Effective systems for handling enquirers and applicants ensure that they are progressed in a timely manner. The delineation of administrative and social work roles is clear to everyone involved. Systems are in place for auditing and quality assurance which are effective. The managers and staff are committed to moving the service on and improving practice to better meet the needs of children and young people. There is a commitment and enthusiasm to examining their practice and

developing services. Foster carer reviews are carried out annually and are chaired by an independent person. The reports are comprehensive and focus on how well young people's needs are being met. Training needs are outlined. The reports also act as a monitoring tool. Foster carers are positive about the support they receive and commented that they can always call on someone for help, advice or assistance. Supervising social workers are clear about their supervisory and monitoring role. Improvements in the format of supervision visit reports demonstrates that young people's needs are being met and that the staff of the agency and foster carers are working to improve outcomes for young people. Reports for statutory reviews are compiled from these and outline the progress being made. High levels of support to carers has been augmented by the development and extension of the role of support workers. They carry out specific, focussed pieces of work to support young people in placements. The Together Trust has a well established training programme for staff and foster carers which includes a wide range of mandatory and optional courses. Carers are able to access training to meet the specific needs of children in their care. Records and files are well ordered and audited by the managers. Not all the required information is held for the young people and the agency is working with local authorities to obtain it. The Trustee's report and financial statements for the year ending March 2007 demonstrate that the agency is financially viable.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

- continue to work with local authorities to ensure that full information is gained as soon as possible after placement (NMS 9)
- ensure that foster placement agreements are compiled for all placements and updated as necessary (NMS 8)
- ensure that placements are only made within the range of a foster carer's approval (NMS 8).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.