

The Together Trust Fostering Service

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

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

This independent fostering agency currently offers up to 67 placements for children and young people of all ages, including continuing care beyond 18 years of age to ensure a successful transition into independence. It is part of a larger registered charity which also provides residential care and education services.

Summary

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

This judgement is reached following a full key inspection over six days. Compliance with all the regulations and the key national minimum standards was assessed. Children and young people, their carers and social workers, and staff were actively involved in the process.

Children and young people are happy and settled in their current placements and some are making particularly excellent progress. They say, 'I really like my foster family because we have a good time and we have a laugh together', 'I am happy with contact with my family and friends' and, 'I like the food and I help to cook.' The opportunities to enjoy and achieve and thereby maximise their full potentials; positively contribute to their daily lives and to their futures; and to learn age and developmentally appropriate independence skills are all outstanding.

Carers confirm satisfaction with the support they now receive and say 'all the supervising social workers are very committed and professional and give 100% of their time and energy.' However, up to quite recently, they have faced changes in supervising social workers, gaps in visits and changes to, and some poor attendance at, the support groups. Moreover, they have not all attended mandatory courses in a timely manner and the systems to address this are not sufficiently robust.

Due to unforeseen circumstances the new registered manager is also covering another management position, so some planned developments to address identified shortfalls have been delayed.

Staff conclude, 'the service continues to experience changes in managers and staff. The new manager has worked very hard entering a vacuum two other managers had left. It has not been an easy transition but things feel much more stable and positive in outlook for the fostering service's future development.'

Improvements since the last inspection

Three recommendations were made following the last inspection on 10 March 2008. In response placements are now in line with carer's approval and placement agreements are on files, albeit some with limited information and not regularly updated. Consequently the new principal manager of this organisation has met with a number of local authorities highlighting the fact that they are still not receiving all the required paperwork prior to each placement. Also, review minutes are often not received before the next meeting and pathway plans for young people are not produced in a timely manner.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is satisfactory.

Overall there are satisfactory arrangements in place to actively promote the health and development of the children and young people living with foster carers. The majority of the young people who returned questionnaires confirmed that they 'always get support and advice about staying healthy' and say that 'the food is very lovely' and, 'I eat lots of fruit and vegetables.' Carers provide varied, well-balanced and nutritious meals and ensure the children get involved in a good range of regular physical activities, including the gym, swimming, walking, running, gymnastics, karate and dance.

Most are registered with local health professionals and carers ensure they attend all routine health checks. Accidents and illnesses are clearly recorded and monitored by the Registered Manager. However, evidence of signed medical consent is not on all the children's files, which has resulted in a delay in hospital treatment.

Carers confirm satisfaction with the support they receive from the agency to promote healthy lifestyles, including an ongoing programme of relevant training courses; for example attachment, substance misuse and supporting young people with mental health needs. They also have access to a range of specialist services to meet identified needs, including speech and language therapists, nurses and a clinical psychologist.

The new principal manager is already addressing the fact that prior to his appointment none of the carers were trained in food hygiene. There are clear guidelines in place in respect to the safe storage, administration, recording and disposal of medicines, but few carers are specifically trained. Consequently not all records are not satisfactorily maintained. Moreover, only some are trained in first aid to ensure a safe response to any minor incidents.

The assessment process explores any health issues with carers that may affect their role and with the expertise of a new medical advisor who is described as making 'a massive contribution', this is further scrutinised by the fostering panel. The service also provides detailed reports for statutory reviews in regard to meeting children's ongoing health needs.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

Overall there are satisfactory arrangements in place to help to keep children and young people safe. They say, 'my carers are very helpful and caring.' Carers say, 'the ethos of this agency that children should be given the best care possible is very evident. Their principles, policies and procedures are needs led. The children come first.' Placing authorities say carers 'consistently provide an excellent standard of care, routine, structure and a lovely lifestyle.'

Carers provide clear and consistent routines and boundaries and good behaviour and effort is positively reinforced which is having the desired effect. Social workers say carers 'manage difficult behaviours with sensitivity and understanding'. Specific training is provided but some have not completed the required refresher courses to ensure they keep abreast of current safe practices. Moreover, not all restraint records are in good order.

Similarly, ongoing safeguarding training is mandatory for all staff and carers to ensure they respond appropriately to any allegations of abuse. However, records suggest some carers have not undertaken this course in a timely manner.

This agency notifies Ofsted of any significant events in a timely manner as is legally required. Allegation records are well maintained clearly evidencing that the agency fully cooperates during any investigation and carers feel well supported and fully informed throughout these difficult processes. However, some consequent recommendations to improve future practice are not efficiently addressed.

Carers provide clean and warm homes, which are suitably decorated and furnished, and provide sufficient space and privacy for everyone living there. Annual health and safety checks are also undertaken to ensure they are free from avoidable hazards, but some actions are not efficiently addressed. Up-to-date and individualised risk assessments and child specific safe caring policies are regularly reviewed and revised as needed. However, they are not signed by all members of the household and the children's social workers as a means of acknowledging their agreement to them.

Where practicable, each child has the opportunity for a gradual period of introduction to the home to enable them to make an informed choice. Consequently some excellent matches are in place and they are thriving. However, other carers felt they were not fully informed of the complexities of placements resulting in disruptions. Moreover, there is limited documentary evidence on some files of a robust process, especially in regard to children's ethnicity and religion.

Staff files are in very good order. Fostering panel members files also include all the details required by the regulations to evidence a safe and competent workforce and there is an effective system in place for the timely renewal of criminal record checks. However, references are not consistently verified by telephone in line with the

national minimum standards.

The fostering panel is suitably constituted in line with the regulations and offers a particularly diverse membership in respect to expertise and relevant backgrounds. The agency ensures that the panel is quorate prior to the start. However, there is not a person previously placed with carers or whose child has been placed with carers, which is a national minimum standard. Panel papers are received in advance to ensure members are well prepared and relevant questions are asked and they effectively exercise their quality assurance function. Moreover, it is also exceptionally well chaired by a highly experienced individual who enables full discussion and deliberation to ensure sound recommendations are made to the agency decision maker. Members describe him as, 'excellent at running the panel yet allowing debate' and 'inclusive yet incisive when the time is right'. Prospective carers describe him as 'especially courteous and respectful' and confirm that although a formal setting, 'everything is done to put you at ease'.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Overall there are outstanding arrangements in place to support children and young people to reach their full potential, and they are treated and respected as individuals in their own right.

This service gives high priority to meeting the educational needs of every child in placement and children and young people confirm that they receive the help they need and enough space to do their homework. Carers ensure children are fully prepared for starting school and consequently learn fast and are 'thrilled with the praise they receive after writing their name for the first time' or getting a certificate for 'the best reader in the class.' They also secure sound and ongoing working relationships with teachers and attend any meetings about their progress. Social workers say that because of the support afforded them by their carers 'they have succeeded through to college.' Young people are really enjoying this new experience and establishing new friendships and others are successfully maintaining places at university.

Carers also actively encourage participation in constructive activities which meet children and young people's particular interests and talents, including judo, singing, drama, football, shopping, sleepovers with friends, arts and crafts, catering and jigsaws. Many also benefit from holidays abroad.

Moreover, the organisation as a whole provides highly skilled and dedicated support workers who enable children and young people to try out their choice of an excellent range of fun and educational activities, which is continually improving their self-esteem and confidence. Recent examples include first aid, road and fire safety, anti bullying, sexual health, circus skills, bowling, jewellery making, cinema and a trip to a safari park, a museum, a farm and a theme park. The annual holiday is particularly popular with children and carers alike.

Throughout a period of staff turnover and despite infrequent visits from some social workers, the support team have remained a consistent and dedicated support to children and carers, which is highly appreciated. Carers describe this support as 'the jewel in the crown.'

They have also taken the trouble to write and specifically thank them 'for organising the best summer holiday events the young people have ever been to' and to say 'we have all enjoyed many events and three wonderful holidays to date organised by the very professional staff.'

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

There is an outstanding range of opportunities for children and young people to contribute positively to their day-to-day lives and their futures. In particular there is a young people's forum, which is representative of looked after children and carer's own children who all have specific roles, including chairing, administration and food and beverages. The entire agenda is also set by the young people and they have developed a very strong sense of fairness in, for example, ensuring the activities chosen are accessible to all ages and abilities. Feedback is received following these social events to inform future practice.

Moreover, they are currently developing their involvement in the recruitment and selection of carers and in their preparation training.

Other opportunities for ensuring the child's voice includes ascertaining their views for their own statutory reviews, carers annual reviews and during supervisory home visits. Birth children are actively involved in the assessment process and invited to all social events.

All of the children and young people say their carers actively listen to them and take notice of their opinions and confirm that they 'always' know who to speak to if they are not happy or have a personal problem. Consequently they have not needed to make a formal complaint. In contrast there are a number of compliments from a range of stakeholders including carers, social workers, guardians and judges. As an example, carers have been described in court as, 'the linchpin in the child's progress' and it was openly acknowledged that 'the contribution they have made has been extensive.'

Positive contact with family and friends is actively promoted in line with any legal directions and young people's personal preferences and consequently they are very happy with the current arrangements in place. Placing authorities confirm that communication is excellent and particularly highlight that 'carers manage contact very skilfully and sensitively.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

Carers provide excellent age and developmentally appropriate opportunities for the children living with them to learn independence skills and consequently some young children are now 'totally independent in terms of their self care skills'. Young people are also developing their competence in, for example, cooking, laundry and using public transport and in social skills. They confirm, 'I can make a good pasta and like making desserts.'

Life skills questionnaires are completed which inform whether additional support is required. Examples of current ongoing direct work includes dealing with anger, self protection and budgeting skills. A specific course is also available to carers on preparing young people for living independently.

Some young people, by choice, have continued in placement beyond their 18th birthday until they feel fully prepared to live independently. Consequently placing authorities say, 'they have grown into mature, sensible and lovely young people and are now living independently and that success is due in part to the placement provided and the excellent support with the transition to their own property.'

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

An up-to-date Statement of Purpose is available, which accurately reflects the current staffing structures and the policies and practices of this agency. There is also a children's guide, but it is only available in one written format so it does not meet the needs of all the children and young people placed.

The new manager is suitably qualified and experienced, very child focused and is making significant positive developments to the systems in place. However, for nearly six months he has also been covering for another registered manager which has delayed some plans.

Staff confirm regular team meetings with open and honest debates, monthly good quality supervision and annual appraisals to explore their future development needs.

Panel members confirm high satisfaction with the training provided to them and everyone involved with this agency benefits from very efficient and competent administrative support. They are described as 'superb,' 'fantastic' and, 'first class.'

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. It is explored during the assessment process, at panel and within all training events, but few have attended the specific course available. A highly knowledgeable and skilled support worker has specific responsibility for ensuring it remains high on every agenda. She is described as having 'a unique art of engaging with young people and helping make their lives fun.'

Consequently the children and young people thoroughly enjoy regular awareness days which widen their understanding and respect of other cultures and includes trying new foods and dressing in traditional clothes. Currently the service offers a good range of carers in respect to relevant experiences and backgrounds, gender, age and sexuality to meet children's diverse and unique needs, but there is limited choice in respect to ethnicity. Consequently current recruitment is specifically targeted to try to address this fact.

There are effective systems in place to ensure the timely assessments, approvals and reviews of carers and detailed reports are produced. Prospective carers describe the preparation training as 'an enjoyable and worthwhile experience. We have learned so much and you answered all our questions.' Ongoing support and supervision is undertaken by qualified social workers. Carers are also highly satisfied with the range and quality of the training provided to ensure they meet the diverse needs of the children and young people placed.

This agency offers an excellent range of support to carers including visits from supervising social workers, support workers, mentors, respite and an effective out of hours service. Carers are highly satisfied with the support currently provided and confirm, 'we always know we can reach someone if needed.' However, up to very recently, the organisation as a whole has faced a high turnover of staff and have at times carried vacancies which has unsettled some carers. This has resulted in a number of changes to their supervising social workers and significant gaps between supervisory visits. The agency's own foster care agreement states that they should take place 'at least monthly' and, 'in the absence of the supervisor, the manager will make other arrangements', but this has not always occurred in practice. There is also a clear expectation that carers attend training and support groups, but there is no effective system in place to satisfactorily address poor attendance.

Moreover, some carers are choosing to resign 'due to lack of placements'. Comments include, 'I am leaving as I have only had six months caring in two years', 'I have the capacity to foster three children yet I have had no placements which is very frustrating and I am fed up' and, 'there are long gaps between placements and we foster teenagers!'

The new principal manager is meeting with placing authorities to specifically address the fact that some children's records provided by them are incomplete, significantly out of date and are not signed by all relevant parties. Confidential records are securely stored at all times and an up to date policy is in place in respect to access.

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/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services Regulations 2002

and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Std.	Action	Due date
24	ensure carers are given the information necessary to care appropriately for each child placed and this is kept up to date (Regulation 17(3))	30/11/2010
6	ensure the welfare of children is safeguarded and promoted at all times. In particular ensure actions arising from health and safety checks are efficiently addressed (Regulation 11(a))	16/11/2010
23	ensure carers receive the training necessary to meet the needs of the children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))	31/01/2011
17	ensure there is at all times a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service. (Regulation 19)	31/01/2011

Recommendations

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

- ensure panel files evidence that telephone enquiries are made as well as obtaining written references (NMS 15.3)
- ensure all documentation contains specific references to matching and includes the child's assessed racial, ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic needs and details what support will be provided to compensate for any gaps in the match between the child and the carer (NMS 8.4 and 8.5)
- ensure safe caring policies are signed by all members of the household and the child's social worker as a means of acknowledging their agreement to them (NMS 9.3)
- ensure one of the independent members of the panel is a person who had at any time been placed with foster carers or whose child has at any time been placed with foster carers (NMS 30.9)
- produce the children's guide in a range of formats to meet the needs of all the children and young people and thereby ensure they all know how to make a formal complaint should the need ever arise (NMS 1.5)
- ensure supervising social workers visit carers in line with the foster carer agreements including an unannounced visit at least once a year (NMS 22.6)
- ensure children's records are satisfactorily maintained including all medication administered and any physical interventions. (NMS 24.1)