

Clifford House Fostering Limited

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

Clifford House is a service which began in 1993 and became a limited company in 2010. There are four specialist professional foster carers offering single placements. The average placement within the specialist fostering provision is five years. The children and young people are placed with professional foster carers who work for Clifford House as employees. There are 17 mainstream foster carers who offer a variety of fostering placements which includes short and long term placements. The Statement of Purpose states that foster carers and children and young people placed receive high levels of support. It undertakes recruitment, assessment, support and training of foster carers.

Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The fostering agency achieves outstanding outcomes for children and young people in foster care. Foster carer's responses through questionnaires are highly complementary about the quality and thoroughness of the assessments, 24-hour support, training and placement matching. One foster carer commented, 'They are excellent at being there when you actually need them.'

The agency is expanding in the right direction and is providing a greater range of placements which match the profile of foster carers recruited. As a result, foster carers are able to provide outstanding care, support and guidance to children and young people. Their individual needs related to their health, social and emotional development and education are all fully met within the fostering household. This leads to placements that are stable, offering security and permanence in the child's life. One agency member of staff commented, 'Foster carers do those extra things that make a real difference to the child.'

The agency provides outstanding structures that support foster carers to be effective practitioners. This is rooted in comprehensive policies, procedures, training and effective quality assurance processes. The leadership and management of the agency is robust, effective and efficient. At the heart of the work is the integral focus on supporting the foster carers to meet the needs of the child.

As a result of this visit, no requirements or recommendations are being set.

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the agency's first inspection since being newly formed as a limited company.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Outcomes for children and young people are excellent and demonstrate highly planned care, support, and guidance for them to grow up healthy and live in healthy environments. Foster carers promote the health arrangements for children and young people in their care. Foster carers are enabled to do this because the agency provides each child with a comprehensive documented health plan. Health records fully reflect children and young people's individual needs, for example, in respect of culture, identity and disability. Foster carers are mindful of their responsibilities placed on them to make regular appointments for the child's dentist, optician and doctor as is necessary.

For those children and young people that require additional emotional and psychological support, the agency is proactive with organising these extra resources. For example, counselling and behavioural management support is readily accessible, and where possible the agency adopts best practice of retaining previous health links with the home authority. In most cases this is a condition of the placement. Foster carer's willingness to meet the holistic health care needs of children and young people ensures that all appointments are attended. The outcome for children and young people is that they have equal access to health services that fully addresses their needs.

Children and young people are encouraged to have a healthy lifestyle. For example, a good diet that is culturally relative. All foster carers record what food children and young people eat. Children and young people's diets are openly and frankly discussed at supervisory visits. Foster carers make it fun for children and young people to explore, prepare and eat vegetables and different fruits. One foster carer explained, 'At mealtimes we all sit together and eat and the meals that I cook are very healthy and nutritious. This is important because I want the children to be healthy.'

Children and young people are kept active through regular play and being physically active. For example, playing at their local football club, rugby, badminton, swimming and ice skating are just a few of the activities. This enhances health and well-being. Foster carers ensure that all activities are properly prepared, even trips to the local park and shop. They do this successfully because they complete a documented risk assessment in consultation with the agency. This means that the welfare of children and young people is being effectively promoted.

Children and young people are protected because the management of medication is safe. This is underpinned by clear policies, procedures and training. Each foster carer's home has effective arrangements for the safe-keeping of medication. This avoids and minimises risks within the foster carer's home and audit checks are periodically completed by the agency. For children and young people this means that they are taking medication they need, when they need it, which keeps them healthy and safe.

The foster carer's homes provide an environment conducive to the care of young people. All the children and young people are provided with their own bedrooms and do not share. This is a prerequisite of the foster carer's assessment. The homes are spacious and the grounds have been arranged in such a way for children and young people to play safely.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people feel safe and are safe. Children and young people understand how to protect themselves and are protected from significant harm. The agency provides a clear strategy regarding bullying. Foster carers have robustly addressed incidents of bullying taking place at school. They work within their individual safe caring policy, which is included in the child's welcome pack and is specific to each foster carer's household. The safe caring policy is changed as circumstances adjust within the foster carer's home. The fostering social workers review the safe caring policies as part of monthly supervision visits. One senior manager stated, 'We expect all carers to respect children and young people's rights and to protect them from harm. The agency provides safeguarding training, a complaints process and procedures for handling children's unhappiness. There is a robust quality assurance process that oversees such matters.' The agency regularly delivers child protection and safeguarding training which promotes high quality practice in order to promote better outcomes for children and young people.

Children and young people rarely go missing but if they do they return quickly. The agency has proactively reviewed the protocols and procedures for runaways and children going missing from the home. The agency has progressive and active links with the police. The consequences and outcomes of this for children and young people of the robust practice is relatively low levels of events taking place. This is commendable considering the complexity of some of the children and young people's levels of need and previous history.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people feel comfortable in their placements. Children and young people develop a sense of self and belonging. This is achieved through foster carers providing a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. One young person stated, 'Since I have arrived here my carers have provided me with a lovely comfortable home and I am going to school and doing well.' A social worker commented, 'The young person has made significant progress since being placed with the foster carer. He has attended college, engaged with the youth offending team and has developed his life skills.'

Children and young people enjoy sound relationships with their foster carers, interact

positively with others and behave appropriately. All foster carers have high expectations of behaviour in the households. This is reinforced using the safe caring policy being adopted successfully by all members of the family.

Foster carers model positive behaviours and this is demonstrated through the assessment process, training and the observations made by the fostering agency during supervision visits. The agency has a very accurate judgment of the foster carer's abilities to promote positive behaviours within the child's placement at the home. This is evidenced through how successfully children and young people progress with modifying and beginning to take responsibility for their own behaviours. One foster carer stated, 'Before the child came here he was known to kick, bite and be very challenging with his behaviour. Now after four months living here with our family we just do not see these types of behaviours. He is more settled, confident and his behaviour at school has improved enormously. The outcome for him is that now he is thriving at school and this enables him to move on in accordance with the placement plan.' Foster carers are able to provide children and young people with high levels of supervision and are resilient to unpredictable behaviours. This is because the agency invests heavily in foster carer training related to promoting positive parenting and promoting positive behaviour.

Children and young people have equal access to activities, leisure pursuits and events that are culturally appropriate. One of the underpinning criteria of foster carer's assessments is to choose people who are active and have regular recourse to a wide range of leisure activities. All children and young people are actively encouraged to join local leisure activities and clubs which are viewed as inclusive and positive activities by foster carers and the agency. This helps improve children and young people's health through the experience of participation and enjoyment. In turn, children and young people develop links with their local community. For example, many children and young people are regularly involved in clubs like football, swimming, scouts, drama, dance and golf. A number of young people have completed the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and this demonstrates the importance given to achievement and celebrating success. This illustrates the agency's commitment to the personal support and development of all children and young people placed in the care of foster carers.

The agency provides training and support for foster carers to ensure robust support to children and young people to maximise their opportunities. All foster carers do their utmost to promote educational achievement by attending parents' evenings and working alongside young people to support them with set educational tasks. Foster carers are confident and articulate to advocate on behalf of the child to ensure that the correct school is sought to meet specific needs. This is because the agency gives a strong commitment to education and to the educational achievement of children and young people. For example, the agency has worked in partnership to maintain school placements and has offered training in positive parenting and behaviour management to help maintain placements.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency ensures that children and young people all play an active part in all aspect of their lives. This is well communicated to children, young people, foster carers and staff alike. The approach adopted is child centred and places a strong focus on the 'voice' of the child. Independent reviewing officers support children and young people to progress with their care plans and break down any potential barriers. One foster carer commented, 'The agency emphasises the importance of maintaining a placement since this is in the child's best interest to avoid additional rejection.'

The agency adopts different methods of gaining children and young people's views in line with their age, understanding, first language and communication method. Foster carer's homes are visited on a regular basis during the placement of the child. The opportunities available for children and young people to express their views include regular face to face meetings with the supervising social worker and senior support workers. In addition, foster carers act as advocates through the weekly consultations which are recorded. Children and young people understand how this is facilitated and the importance placed on them being engaged and involved in making decisions about their lives. The agency and foster carers are skilled at providing explanations and choice. This includes support to understand why it may not be possible to act upon their wishes in all cases. Periodically throughout the year, children and young people contribute to pre-review questionnaires and other questionnaires produced by the agency that seek their views on happiness and their placement. One foster carer commented, 'The agency is outstanding because our fostering service always tries to involve any young person in decisions.'

Children and young people, where appropriate, enjoy constructive contact with their family, friends and other people who play a significant role in their lives. Children and young people keep in touch with their family and community. All foster carers are supported to be as inclusive as possible in all aspects of the child's life. All contact arrangements are clearly set out in the plan of care for the child. Many of the foster carers are involved with the practical arrangements of transportation, meeting at different venues, personal meetings and in a supportive role with telephone and letter contact. Children and young people understand the importance of retaining positive and constructive relationships with their family, friends and others significant to them and are supported in doing so. Foster carers are effective practitioners in this area because of the level of training provided by the agency, which places a strong emphasis on helping children and young people develop emotional resilience and positive self-esteem. Beyond children and young people's placement with the foster carers, there is on-going informal emotional support. This bolsters the well-being of children and young people who have left agency placements. One senior manager explained, 'This also offers reassurances as an agency that we are getting it right because we receive the direct feedback.'

Children and young people are welcomed into the foster home and leave the foster

home in a planned and sensitive manner. This makes them feel special and valued. In the first instance, a pre-placement meeting always takes place with the agency, foster carer and placing social worker. This is where the matching consideration is made of the suitability of the child to the foster carer. Children and young people benefit because their education, contact arrangements and the type of introduction are agreed. Extra care is taken for any child that is on short notice or an emergency so that the support, help and guidance is sensitive. This reassures children and young people and allays any fear or confusion. One foster carer rated the agency as outstanding because, 'Every piece of information is passed onto us for our information.'

Children and young people are made to feel part of the family. They are not treated differently to the foster carer's own children living in the household. Children and young people feel included. The child's needs are met and they benefit from a stable placement. One external therapeutic worker commented, 'The consistency and warmth shown by the foster carers has been the main factor in the child's progress.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Young people are prepared for and supported into adulthood, which helps them achieve their potential. All young people are in full time education with some young people attending further education. Foster carers communicate well with young people encouraging them to have ambitions and aspirations. For example, young people are encouraged to continue to remain in education or undertake vocational training or employment as appropriate.

Foster carers provide all young people with creative opportunities to learn independent skills. As young people progress through placement, they are actively encouraged to develop key practical skills such as preparing and cooking simple meals, managing their laundry and using public transport. Foster carers also encourage young people to develop an understanding of managing money and managing their own finances. All this support, help and guidance is paced to suit the young person as appropriate to their age and development. One young person stated, 'I really enjoy living with my foster carers. They do all the right things to help me in life.'

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The management and leadership of the fostering agency is outstanding. The fostering agency recruits, assesses and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people. The agency provides care for, and is proactive in, assessing the current and future needs of children and young people. One foster carer commented, 'I chose the agency because they are very meticulous, which helps me be safe as a foster carer.' Another foster carer commented, 'I chose to

foster for this service because of the amazing support that they offer and the way that they match placements.'

The fostering panel and decision-maker make timely, quality and appropriate recommendations and decisions. The agency's panel is aiming to be more diverse. One of the senior managers explained, 'The agency is recruiting more panel members from the cultural backgrounds that reflect the cultural backgrounds of the children who are being referred.' The panel operate fairly by ensuring applicants can attend panels and monitor all assessments to ensure that they are all thorough, rigorous and fair. The foster carer's assessments are subject to rigorous scrutiny prior to being submitted to panel by the agency management team. There is a strong focus on requiring the reports to be evidence-based. The panel provides a clear overview of the adequacy of the reports submitted via panel to the agency. As a result, this promotes the panel role to ensure that all foster carer applicants can offer safe care to children and young people.

The fostering agency's operation meets the aims and objectives in its Statement of Purpose. One of the driving aims is to deliver a partnership based service that is fully inclusive of children and young people, their families, foster carers, local authorities and other key stakeholders. The agency offers children and young people two distinctive foster placements. The specialist foster carers provide mostly single placements for children and young people with dedicated time for the sole care of the child. This specialist fostering is conducted within a therapeutic and multi-disciplinary framework of professional support. For children and young people with more complex needs, this level of specialist care, support and guidance meets their diverse needs well. The mainstream foster carers provide placements for short-term, long-term and emergency care. One senior manager commented, 'We have a team of foster carers who have been with the agency for a number of years. In our view, this gives a strong base to build on and indicates that the carers we employ are satisfied with the service.'

All placements made are suitably matched. The agency collates appropriate information to inform the matching process through the assessment and preparation training. The characteristics of foster carers and of the children and young people are appropriately matched in order to avoid placement disruptions or breakdowns. As a result, children and young people's relationships with foster carers benefit, because the placement meets the child's identified needs and takes account of their wishes and feelings.

The fostering service is provided and managed by those who are suitable to work with children and young people. The management team and social workers have the appropriate skills, experience and qualifications to deliver an efficient and effective service. In addition to this, the agency also employs senior support workers who provide extra support, help and guidance to foster carers. Children and young people's therefore receive an excellent service that meets their needs..

The fostering service is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently, delivering a service which meets the needs of children, young people, foster carers and staff. The

agency is financially sound. There has been a substantial change with the creation of a new company and more recently new changes within the small group of directors. Directors have planned effectively ensuring a positive transition for children, foster carers and staff.

There is careful selection and vetting of staff and fostering households. There is a dedicated and qualified human resource role to oversee and support the recruitment and marketing for foster carers. The agency has a sound robust recruitment processes to ensure that all individuals are the right people in their roles. The agency properly examines the attitudes, competencies, experience and qualifications of staff. One senior manager stated, 'It is our view that we promote a workforce that is confident and safe and that those who use the service can trust and respect us.' These processes and procedures help to keep children and young people safe from harm.

Foster carers receive the training and development they need to carry out their role effectively. This is because there is a clear framework of training and development in place organised by the agency's training department. Foster carers and staff attend training on a wide range of topics related to the demands and challenges of the fostering task. This helps professionalise their important role in helping children and young people succeed. All training carefully considers equality and diversity perspectives. The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Foster carers and staff enhance children and young people's quality of life as well as keeping them safe.

Foster carers receive the support and supervision they need in order to care properly for children and young people placed with them. All foster carers are visited at least monthly with in-between visits if the needs of the children and young people require this. The support is carefully tailored for new foster carers as well as experienced and established foster carers. The outcomes for children and young people are that they are being effectively monitored through the agency's corporate parent role.

Staff are supported and guided to fulfil their roles and provide a high quality service to children and young people. The workload is evenly spread over the team. Staff support and supervision is taking place at regular intervals and there is a formalised annual appraisal. One social worker commented, 'The agency is excellent because there is a formal induction for all new social workers and the management team are very inclusive in their professional approach.' One senior support worker explained, 'I receive high-quality supervision and this makes me confident with my practice and professional approach.'

Children are cared for in line with their placement plan. All foster carers visited have an up-to-date placement plan for the child, which has been reviewed. Foster carers are diligent with ensuring the objectives of the placement are being met through the day to day support of the fostering household. This includes meeting the child's health, education and welfare needs. The agency's supervision visits occur regularly and examines the foster carer's records to ensure the child's individual needs are appropriately met and recorded.

Records are clear, up-to-date, stored securely and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. Children and young people's records contain sensitive and respectful recordings and this is carefully monitored by the agency. The fostering agency takes action to chase up outstanding reviews or visits from the responsible authority. It contributes to those reviews and assists the child to contribute also.

The new premises are suitable and relevant for the purpose of the agency and cover a good geographical area. Appropriate rooms are available for foster carer's training, panel meetings and other meetings. The administration of the agency is well organised with clear lines of accountability and levels of communication. Outcomes for children and young people are excellent because the agency is able to retain foster carers and also attracts new foster carers. Foster carers receive excellent support to have planned short breaks so that proper planned care is taking place for children and young people during the break.