

# Compass Childrens Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is operated by a private company. It provides short term, long term and respite foster placements across the Midlands. On the 31 March 2012, it had 194 registered foster carers in 109 households providing 143 children and young people with placements.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

The service is highly effective in making and sustaining placements for children and young people. High standards have been maintained since the previous inspection when the service was also judged to be outstanding. Placement disruptions are minimal and the importance of stability for children and young people is fully understood and acted upon by staff. Progress is monitored particularly thoroughly, and children and young people are helped to make exceptional progress. As a result, they are able to compete and benefit on an equal basis with their peers. In several cases this has led to particular success, for example, in regional and national sporting events.

The vast majority of children and young people feel completely safe and secure in their placements. No negative comments were received from children and young people about their placements, and placement arrangements take into account the needs of siblings wherever possible. External professionals who use the service are whole-heartedly positive about it. The views of children and young people are used to improve practice and any issues are addressed quickly. This has led to improvements in the way foster children are represented at their reviews, for example. Significant success is also achieved in education. Children and young people are engaged promptly and effectively in educational activities, using excellent schemes that also benefit their general welfare.

Managers use research and government initiatives, as well as their own extensive checks, to drive improvements. The service is actively engaged with local and

national partners and uses such information to set new targets. The staff training programme, for example, reflects the current national concerns about children and young people who go missing and the sexual exploitation of children. The service has also contributed to various pilot projects and its good practices have been acknowledged in published literature.

## **Outcomes for children and young people**

Outcomes for children and young people are **outstanding**.

Children and young people's circumstances are carefully assessed on admission so that a clear baseline is agreed and their progress is tracked. This occurs with full consultation of children and young people and partner agencies. The service then carefully coordinates the care children and young people need to progress. This is an efficient and effective system that keeps the needs of children and young people at its centre. Several professionals commented that, as a result, their looked after children 'had never done so well'. They feel that children and young people receive the best care possible because communication is prompt and agreed actions are fully implemented.

Children and young people receive education of a standard that is particularly noteworthy. Where necessary, they are engaged in prompt and imaginative education services that focus entirely on their individual needs. Language barriers and learning difficulties are addressed using specialist agencies and techniques. This is pursued energetically and persistently, with input from specially trained foster carers in some cases. Professional staff always support the compilation of personal education plans and guide foster carers where necessary. Consequently, children's educational achievement is promoted confidently by carers as part of the professional team; as a result there are many significant improvements. For the whole group of children and young people, school attendance is exceptionally high and improving compared to those who are not looked after. Children and young people's self-confidence and self-esteem are encouraged by the praise and rewards they routinely receive. Professionals consider without reservation that children and young people make exceptional progress.

The same enthusiasm leads to children and young people enjoying and succeeding in a wide range of activities. Some have achieved national success in sporting events and others make significant progress in areas such as art and entertainment. Many attended a fine art event organised by the service and attended by civic dignitaries. A drama event is being planned. One young person filmed and produced a DVD of a company social event. Individual progress and enjoyment are sought and facilitated whatever their abilities. Children and young people learn that they have a place in the community and contribute positively and confidently.

Children and young people feel they have particularly constructive relationships with their carers and are fully integrated into their households. This reflects positively on the matching process that occurs. One young person who had experienced several foster placements reported it was the best placement he had had. Professionals

confirm that foster carers are particularly effective in establishing excellent relationships with children and young people and avoiding placement breakdowns. Staff and carers report that many young adults keep in touch with them and remain positive about their experiences in foster care. One professional said that she 'breathes a sigh of relief' when she knows a child has been placed with the service. Placement endings are controlled so that children and young people do not feel further rejection.

Strategies and routines are frequently reviewed to ensure that children and young people have the best chance of success. They benefit from prompt professional attention to any health needs, and difficulties are anticipated wherever possible. Mental health services are obtained and the needs of children and young people from overseas or who have learning disabilities are carefully addressed. Children and young people participate in imaginative and research-based projects to promote healthy lifestyles. These are inclusive and fun. One such initiative led to the publication of a company recipe book for young people leaving foster care. All the young people are thoroughly helped to prepare for independence and the service has its own programme of training. In addition, a charitable trust has been established that provides ongoing support to care leavers. As one young person said, 'It takes the pressure off.'

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

Carers consider that the support they get is prompt, thorough and clearly exceeds minimum expectations. For example, the frequency of supervisory and unannounced visits exceeds the number required. Most foster carers judge their service to be good or outstanding. One carer said, 'We have always been fully supported; they listen, act and respond. They have the child's best interest at the centre of what they do and they care for the carer too.'

Extremely robust procedures are used to recruit and assess suitable carers from a variety of social groups. As a result, children and young people's religious and cultural needs are represented by the diverse range of carers. This is supplemented by rigorous panel processes, carer training and support that serve to engage and maintain a high calibre of carers. Carers are well informed and enthusiastic. Any concerns they may have are addressed promptly and managers involve themselves in face-to-face meetings. If necessary, additional support is provided to households by the supervising social worker or an unqualified member of staff. It is particularly significant to the high standards of care that carers, their own children and foster children contribute to the recruitment and training processes. This is an extremely effective feature of the service that also serves to increase the skills and engagement of those involved.

Carers are encouraged and helped to increase their skills substantially. They are set high expectations for their engagement with support groups and in attending training events. In addition to accessing a wide, well-structured range of training courses,

they also contribute to the training and support of new carers, which is particularly well received. All carers achieve the required level of training. Carers have additional opportunities to develop their skills. Some become qualified to provide experiential education to foster children on a sessional basis. This facility and the complementary education available to children and young people who are not in full-time education, are outstanding in terms of the outcomes. Foster carers' annual reviews show the significant improvement in their own skills and the benefits of these skills for children and young people. Carers also contribute to the improvement of the organisation itself by representing their geographical carer support groups at development meetings. The training expectations for the main carer in households are clear and challenging. Partners also receive supervision, training and appraisals, and work is underway to address their specific developmental needs. For example, work has started to more closely support the needs of men in foster care.

Improvements to the service are also being driven by all members of staff, including panel members and independent assessors. Feedback is incorporated into everyone's practice, and panel members have regular additional opportunities to comment on the service. The foster carer assessments that panel review are part of a thorough and robust procedure in which the wide range of panel members' skills is brought to bear. Assessors receive induction and regular ongoing training and supervision that ensure their reports are of a high standard. Panel members also participate in and provide objectivity to carer' reviews following the first one. This is further evidence of a rigorous approach to ensuring that high standards of care and safeguarding persist.

Matching of new children and young people with foster carers also reflects this ethos. Placements are made with the long-term needs of the individual in mind, whether their immediate needs are for short term, long term or respite care. Admissions of children and young people with disabilities for respite care, for example, take into account their need for gradual introductions and alternative methods of communication. Children and young people's welfare and that of foster households override the commercial imperatives to maximise occupancy. This is so successful that local authority commissioners consider the service to be their 'first port of call'.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **outstanding** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

There are very few incidents of children and young people putting themselves at risk, and carers are confident about dealing with safeguarding concerns. No instances of bullying were reported, for example. Great effort is put into anticipating and pre-empting hazardous activities and rewarding success. Any concerns are shared immediately with relevant agencies so that protective strategies can be agreed. Such strategies are strictly adhered to by carers. In addition, recruitment practices are stringent (involving, for example, an independent expert) and are applied consistently for all types of staff and all carers. Any gaps in the references of new carers, for example, automatically lead to decisions being adjourned until full facts

are available. As a result, children and young people feel safe and are safe. They also contribute to recruitment by discussing recruitment practices with managers and providing questions for candidates to answer.

Where appropriate, children and young people are also engaged in compiling strategies to reduce risks to themselves, for example, if they self-harm. In addition, the service has created extra procedures to ensure high standards are maintained. These detailed, independent reviews of practice may be implemented if safeguarding outcomes are too low and individuals are at risk. Conclusions lead to practices being amended, for example, through additional support or training of individual carers. Social workers consider that the carers cannot be faulted and that even on reflection no shortfalls in the service can be identified. Practices are constantly kept under review, for example, regarding how children and young people are engaged in discussions when they return to placements after going missing.

Similarly, lessons are learnt from national enquiries and government initiatives. Prompt attention was given, for example, to recent national concerns about the sexual exploitation of looked after children and young people. Links are established with specialist agencies who provide expert advice. Lessons are also sought from allegations and complaints, although few occur, and are brought to the attention of the directors in frequent written reports and action plans. Supervising social workers are regularly in touch with foster children and ask them about any concerns. Children and young people confirm that they are regularly asked about the care they receive. Children's social workers consider that even when children and young people put themselves at risk, the carers and staff 'stick with it and provide fantastic liaison'.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **outstanding**.

The new manager was registered last year and has successfully overseen a challenging period of restructuring. Lessons are learnt from difficulties and a high level of consistency has been maintained in the staff team and among carers. The structure reflects the company's latest business plan and facilitates the developments that are underway and are planned. Documents such as the Statement of Purpose reflect a dynamic and positive organisation that has a wide range of carers, children and young people at its heart. High quality monitoring is a major feature of the service, with associated adjustments and improvements evident throughout. Monitoring of issues such as children and young people's prescribed medication is routinely undertaken by supervising social workers, checked by their team managers and overseen by the Registered Manager.

All activities routinely benefit from effective consultation and partnership with stakeholders. The views of staff are independently collated every year and the views of individual children and young people are part of the assessment of carers and of supervising social workers. Separate events are also used to consult groups of children and young people. In addition, the directors visit each household every two

years to obtain carers' views personally and to check on care practices. Quality assurance is systematically applied so that practices are as good as possible.

Electronic recording systems are of a high standard but are nevertheless under review to make them simpler to use. This will ensure, for example, that carers are supplied promptly with minutes of their supervision meetings. Supervising social workers routinely take notes of all meetings, which are then typed and serve as accurate records until minutes are received. This simple process means that implementation of action points starts promptly and that carers have copies. Children and young people's needs are consistently and quickly addressed by the service having its own documents with which to coordinate practice in tandem with those from partner agencies. Excellent practice is demonstrated by the use of tracker documents that facilitate accurate coordination and clearly show the progress that children and young people are making.

Members of the senior management team contribute directly to local and national forums and to consultations about foster care. New initiatives are promptly absorbed if they are likely to improve practice, for example, the recent Foster Carers' Charter, which is reflected in policy documents. The service's special interest in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children means that staff keep up to date on developments in this area. Practices are improved whenever necessary. For example, additional work is underway to support older asylum-seeking young people. The ability of the service to provide a specialist service for children and young people with disabilities is also kept under review. Challenges such as providing a coherent service across its area are carefully assessed in light of anticipated demand and the business plan.

Facilitating effective partnerships is another success. Staff and managers have a wealth of experience from across sectors and use this in their work. Other agencies consider that the service they have received over many years is second to none. In particular, staff and carers are well prepared; they do what is agreed, and action is always taken as promptly as possible. Everyone associated with the agency feels the service is striving to improve.

## **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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 independent fostering agencies.