

Fostering Matters Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering Matters is a small privately owned independent fostering agency. It aims to meet a range of placement needs for children and young people, including sibling groups and parent and child arrangements. There are currently 54 children placed and there are 57 approved foster carer households.

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**.

The overall effectiveness of this independent fostering agency is good. The agency provides stable placements for young people who are generally older, whose behaviour is more challenging, and who have experienced placement breakdowns in other agencies.

The agency is highly regarded by its placing and partnership agencies. Foster placements are made and maintained successfully. There are fewer foster care breakdowns compared to similar agencies.

Foster carers are experienced and well trained and supported by link workers who are also experienced and who enjoy good relationships with carers and young people. Training for carers and social workers is of a good quality and this is further supported by effective supervision and management.

The agency has made great improvements in the assessment and preparation of proposed carers since the time of the previous inspection and the fostering panel has developed a system to consider assessments with greater rigour. Assessments are now timely, and more analytic. This ensures that only the most able carers will be approved and consequently the likelihood of placement breakdowns will be reduced.

The agency is developing ways of incorporating the views of children, young people and foster cares into their annual review of the quality of care. The current information provided is not specific enough.

Notifications of significant events have been sent to the regulatory body electronically. The service does not follow this up in hard copy form.

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 the registered person has a system in place to notify within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. Specifically, that email notifications to the regulatory body are followed up in written form (NMS 29.1)
- ensure that the views of the child, the child's family, social worker and independent reviewing officer are sought regularly on the child's care (NMS 1.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This independent fostering agency provides a good level of foster care for children and young people. Young people generally feel safe, happy and settled in their placements.

Young people are well matched with carers and are provided with information about the proposed fostering household. Foster carers receive all available information about young people about to be placed. In case of an unforeseen delay, the agency will ensure that this information is gathered from the placing authority and made available to them within a short period of time. Placement planning meetings are held either prior to placement, or in the case of an emergency placement within 24 hours. This determines how a young person's needs will be best met and helps to provide young people with placement stability and a clear understanding about what they can expect from their foster care. Commissioning officers of placing authorities report that placement breakdowns are low compared to other agencies.

Children and young people say that they feel safe and are happy in their placements and feel that they receive a good quality of care. One young person commented: 'I really like it here, the family have helped me to settle into school and I feel like part of the family.'

The agency encourages carers to access local facilities and resources for young people and to engage them in leisure and recreational pursuits in the local community. Several young people spoken to had become members of local football and swimming clubs. This helps to promote young people's health, to positively engage in wider society, and to increase their enjoyment of life.

Foster carers support young people in maintaining contact with their families where appropriate and birth parents are encouraged to attend children's review meetings. Carers receive extensive training in attachment and loss theory and this enables them to help young people to understand their backgrounds and the reasons why they are living away from home. This helps young people to have a sense of their personal identity and informs their sense of self.

There are numerous opportunities available to young people where they can express any concerns about their care, or contribute to service development. These include accessing the social workers and independent reviewing officers from their placing authorities during, or outside of review meetings. Many of these authorities also have an advocacy service and participation officers to whom young people can express their views of their care. The foster carer's supervising social worker from the agency will also see young people individually during routine visits to fostering households and ask young people their opinion of their care. The agency also provides young people with a range of written information about the service which includes the contact details of helping agencies. The agency conducts periodic questionnaire surveys of young people where they can express their views about their care.

The agency and its foster carers are actively involved in promoting young people's educational progress. There are members of the fostering panel and the social work team who are qualified teachers and the agency links well with the local authority 'Virtual School' in supporting individual young people. Foster carers attend school 'parent's evenings' in a discreet and professional way. The agency ensures that placing authorities are made aware of their responsibilities to ensure that all looked after children and young people will have a personal education or pathway plan in place.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The majority of foster carers working for this agency have many years' experience in fostering and in other areas of child care. Recruitment is mainly by word of mouth and by foster carers recommending the agency to other carers. This means that children and young people receive care from committed and experienced

professionals. The majority of young people placed are older and have more challenging behaviours and many of the young people have had numerous foster care breakdowns in previous agency placements. One placing authority social worker commented: 'They are some of the best carers I have come across. Very committed and child focussed. The young person has settled well in spite of numerous breakdowns in previous agencies. The agency work well with schools and health and is very multi-agency focussed.'

Supervising social workers are part of an experienced social work team, the majority of whom have worked at this agency for several years. All staff have a good awareness of individual carers households and of the individual young people placed. This means that there is always a worker on duty with a good knowledge of children's needs. The foster panel chair and vice chair are actively involved in the 'Skills to Foster' preparation course for carers and they also participate in the core training skills programme for carers during their preparation and assessment period. This means that they have a good knowledge of prospective carers before they come to panel. This insight also helps them to make better informed judgements at panel, thereby ensuring that the foster carers approved have been rigorously assessed. All foster carers undertake the Training Support and Development (TSD) induction standards within 12 months of approval.

Foster carers support contact between young people and their birth families. They make great efforts to support the cultural and religious beliefs of young people placed. One placing authority social worker commented: 'Contact with the birth mother is very well supported.'

The fostering panel has worked with an external consultancy service to meet the action requirements and recommendations of the previous inspection and has now developed a rigorous quality assurance programme which uses a set of key performance indicators for the assessment of prospective foster carers. This programme also requires the panel to give feedback to the service on the quality of reports. These improvements mean that the panel can now make more effective decisions in relation to the cases before them.

The service works well with placing authorities to ensure that young people are matched with carers who can meet their needs. The agency will chase placing authorities if all necessary information is not available at the time of placement and they have now developed systems to ensure that this information is made available within an appropriate timeframe.

Placement planning meetings take place within 24 hours of a young person being placed. These meetings identify how a young person's needs will be met as well as any risk assessments of a young person that are required to keep a young person safe. Placement plans are included in young people's care plan reviews. These measures ensure that young people are suitably placed in stable placements which are well supported by the link workers in the agency.

An independent reviewing officer's commented: 'I'm very happy with the quality of

care in this placement. The child is happy there and the link worker for the agency always attends reviews and provides a clear and concise report for the review. A professional service.'

A second reviewing officer commented: 'This service is excellent for this young person. He's been there a while and his behaviour has improved no end. The link worker always attends review meetings and gives good quality reports. One of the better agencies.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

All children met during the course of the inspection, and from their questionnaire surveys returned to the regulatory body, said that they feel safe. Information documents given to young people by the agency contain the details of helping agencies that they could contact if they had any concerns or worries about their care. These documents also describe the agency's complaints procedures. No complaints have been received from young people since the time of the last inspection. Young people are always seen independently during visits by their link workers or by their placing social workers and again by independent reviewing officers at their periodic reviews. This means that young people have good access to a range of appropriate means of support should they have concerns or worries about their care.

Young people all have clearly written placement plans in place which detail their care needs and which also contain risk assessments which give guidance to staff on actions to be taken to avoid and protect them in times of particular risk. The agency has good links with local police officers with particular responsibility for children who may be likely to go missing and a protocol has been established in this respect. Foster carers are well aware of this protocol and the actions to be followed when a young person goes missing. This helps to keep these young people safe. The agency have developed a system for monitoring incidents of young people who go missing. This helps them to track and review risk assessments for particular young people were going missing is a particular concern.

Foster carers receive training on safeguarding children as part of their preparation group, and again as part of their core training programme. This training is regularly updated. Link social workers also receive training in safeguarding children which is also routinely updated. Each foster carer receives at least two unannounced visits per annum from their link worker to check on the safety and wellbeing of the young people placed.

Working in close partnership with relevant safeguarding agencies helps to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. The agency works well with the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) on their policy review and staff training. The LSCB chair commented: 'One of our better fostering agencies. They consult us for help and advice and we have been involved in the construction of

safeguarding policies and procedures.'

Similarly, the agency has a good relationship with the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) who stated: 'A very good agency. They act appropriately and swiftly in the event of any safeguarding allegation about carers. No current concerns.'

Scrutiny of staff, panel members and foster carer files indicate that recruitment and vetting procedures are rigorous with a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. This ensures that working practices and procedures help to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm vulnerable children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The leadership and management of this independent fostering agency is good. All of the action requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been fully implemented. This demonstrates that the management team responds effectively to recognised areas of necessary development.

The agency has established highly effective working relationships with the numerous local authorities who place children and young people with them. One commissioning officer commented: 'We have a good and positive relationship with this agency who work hard to ensure placement stability.'

A commissioning officer from another authority stated: 'This is a very good agency in terms of flexibility, availability and support.' Effective working relationships with placing authorities help to ensure that children and young people receive a good level of care.

The management of this agency have established systems of monitoring and review. These systems are designed to look at the progress that children and young people make in the various areas of their development, when compared to their starting points. These include systems that focus on the frequency of children going missing, their educational attendance and attainment, and the behaviour management of young people including the reduction of offending. This monitoring helps the agency to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Annual quality and performance data forms are promptly completed and submitted to the regulatory body. Internal systems of monitoring and review contribute to the annual review of the quality of care which includes a statement on areas of necessary improvement and development. Although the agency conduct frequent questionnaire surveys on all stakeholders, including young people and foster carers these findings are not made explicit in the review. This means that stakeholders may not be aware that their views are valued and acted upon.

The agency produces a clear and comprehensive statement of purpose which clearly

identifies its aims and objectives. Children's guides are clearly written in a format which is easily understood by young people and which can be transferred to other languages if necessary. Both of these documents are regularly reviewed and this means that stakeholders are kept up to date with this important information.

All social workers are professionally qualified and registered with their professional body. All Foster carers must complete the Training Standards for Development (TSD) induction programme within 12 months of appointment. Social workers and foster carers benefit from a good level of on-going training in all of the key areas of their work. Social workers receive fortnightly supervision and there are monthly team meetings. Foster carers are visited by their link workers at least monthly, and more regularly fortnightly.

The manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. The fostering panel is chaired by a professionally qualified and experienced person and the panel members, supervising social works and managers undertake an annual performance appraisal which identifies their training and development needs. This means that children and young people are looked after by a skilled and appropriately supervised workforce.

Notifiable events under schedule 7 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 have been completed and contain follow up action taken by the agency. Whilst these have been emailed to the regulatory body these have not been followed up in hard copy form as required.

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.