

Compass Fostering Central Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC065772
Inspection date	20/06/2014
Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Mountfields House, Epinal Way, LOUGHBOROUGH, Leicestershire, LE11 3GE
Telephone number	08708 501012
Email	admin@compasschildren.co.uk
Registered person	Compass Services for Children Limited T/A Compass Children's Services
Registered manager	Melanie Elizabeth Aked
Responsible individual	Bernadine Louise Gibson
Date of last inspection	06/07/2012

© Crown copyright 2014

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Compass Fostering Central Ltd is one of six branches of Compass Fostering, a private limited company. It provides short term, long term, emergency, and parent and child foster placements across the Midlands. On the 31 March 2014, it had 207 registered foster carers in 115 households. This offers 256 places to children and young people, of which 148 were filled. It approved 21 households in the year 2013/14, with a further 28 applications in progress.

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**.

Compass Fostering Central Ltd provides a good service overall. Children and young people are placed with foster carers who meet their needs well, and as a result, they settle, thrive and make outstanding progress in safe and secure placements. Educational outcomes are a particular strength, as a consequence of the high quality educational support from the agency. A carer described the educational support as 'phenomenal'.

The agency has effective systems for recruiting, preparing and assessing foster carers. Recruitment is increasing; in the year 2012/13 the agency approved 13 fostering households, compared to 21 in the year 2013/14. The agency has realistic growth targets which it continues to meet. Assessments are timely and analytical,

resulting in carers who can support children with a variety of needs, including parent and child placements, disabled children and young people with complex and challenging needs. Placement breakdowns are below the national average and commissioners comment that placement stability is good.

Foster carers feel valued and supported. One carer commented: 'Compass are there for you.' Training is a significant strength of this agency; training is relevant, professional and regularly evaluated to ensure it is meeting the needs of carers, and therefore children. Training continues to be a developing area, encompassing a positive psychological approach to caring for children.

There are good systems for ensuring that children, young people and foster carers are involved in future developments. Carers feel particularly well consulted. They say that communication is good and that they feel listened to. For example, their views about their training needs have been incorporated into the training programme.

There are good working relationships with local authorities and other statutory bodies to promote the welfare and protection of children and young people. The agency learns from and improves its practice when allegations or complaints are made, thereby further assuring children's and young people's well-being.

The agency has undergone a change in ownership since the last full inspection and is now part of a larger group. Key individuals have also changed, such as the responsible individual and Registered Manager. However, the leadership team remains an effective and visible entity. Monitoring and governance are well ordered and communication at all levels is effective.

A number of shortfalls have been identified which are of an administrative nature and have little or no impact on outcomes for children and young people. These include: ensuring a complete children's register is maintained; improved record keeping in relation to matching, risk assessments, panel minutes, and staff supervision; staff appraisal; and developing a more formalised approach to parent and child placements.

Areas for 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 (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
22 (2011)	ensure the fostering service provider maintains and keeps up to date the records specified in Schedule 2. This is with specific reference to the children's register. (Regulation 22 (1))	29/08/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure children's safety and well-being are promoted in all fostering placements. This is with specific reference to undertaking written risk assessments, particularly when children are identified as being at significant risk (NMS 4.1)
- ensure if any gaps are identified when matching a child with a fostering household, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. This is with specific reference to the matching report completed by the agency (NMS 15.1)
- ensure that other than in an emergency, a child must only be placed with foster carers whose terms of approval match the child's circumstances (Volume 4 Statutory Guidance, paragraph 3.3)
- ensure the minutes of the panel meeting are accurate and clearly record the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for the recommendation. This specifically relates to ensuring the role of panel members is clearly recorded so that quoracy is assured, and that the reasons are more clearly highlighted (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)
- ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually, and where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. (NMS 24.6)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The children and young people placed with this agency's carers make exceptional progress and have very positive experiences and outcomes. Of particular note is the progress they make in relation to educational outcomes. School attendance is 96.73% compared with the government target of 95%, with 40% achieving 100% attendance. Children and young people are rewarded with a voucher each term when they achieve 100% attendance, as an acknowledgement of the significant improvement they are making. In addition, attainment is well above the average for looked after children, with 40% of young people placed with Compass carers achieving grades A to C at GCSE compared to 13% for the looked after children population. Attendance and attainment are closely and regularly monitored by the head of service for education. One independent reviewing officer commented of a

young person, 'She is doing fantastically well at school.'

Children and young people who do not have educational placements benefit considerably from experiential education which is offered by trained and accredited carers on a short-term basis until they have a permanent educational placement. This ensures they have a positive experience, and for those children and young people who have previous negative experiences of education, this can be a beneficial introduction to a new school situation as well as a confidence booster. Currently all children of compulsory school age have educational placements.

Children and young people are provided with excellent child-friendly profiles prior to moving in with their foster family. If the move is planned, they can also visit in advance, which enables them to settle and know what to expect.

Young people are very well attached to their foster carers and their needs are very well met. They settle and feel safe as a result of the nurturing care with which they are provided. One social worker commented of a young person: 'This is the only placement she has invested in.' The rate of unplanned endings is lower at 4.46% than the national average of 7%, with the majority of these being moves to more appropriate residential resources. On a very positive note, some children benefit from their placements becoming permanent fostering or adoptive placements. One social worker said: 'I couldn't ask for a better outcome.'

Children and young people maintain positive contact with family members, including brothers and sisters, grandparents and parents. Carers demonstrate a very strong understanding of the importance of this and go the extra mile where they can, for example, by attending appointments about the child with the birth parents, and making brothers and sisters welcome at their own homes. This ensures that children and young people have a positive self-view and understand their identity and heritage.

Children and young people develop their skills, confidence and self-esteem as they are encouraged to be active participants in their community. They engage in a variety of activities, such as swimming, youth clubs, volunteering, army cadets, music and sports. They are welcomed into the foster family and treated as one of the family. They develop skills for independent living as they are encouraged to keep their rooms tidy and help with household chores, including cooking.

Some young people have very complex needs when they arrive in their foster placement. These include self-harming behaviour, going missing very regularly, and drug and alcohol misuse. It is noteworthy that these risk-taking behaviours have significantly reduced, and in some cases been completely eliminated, as a result of being in foster care. One carer commented: 'She has turned it around totally.'

Children and young people have their health needs very well met. They access universal and specialist services as required, including smoking cessation advice. A recent development is the use of a psychologist to provide carers with a consultation session if this would be helpful in understanding how to provide better strategies

when struggling. Foster carers are very good advocates for their children, including those who are disabled, and this has resulted in significant improvements in their independence and levels of functioning.

Children and young people have a variety of ways in which they can express their views, and it is clear that these are taken seriously. They can speak to their carers, their social workers, their independent reviewing officers, Compass supervising social workers or have access to an advocate. They engage in twice yearly Compass Consults Kids events, and their views have been implemented; for example, their questions are used by the fostering panel and in staff recruitment.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has an effective and systematic process for recruiting carers who can meet the needs of children and young people who require a fostering placement. Its relationship with commissioners ensures that it is aware of the areas it needs to target for its recruitment, be it in terms of needs or geography. Carers undergo a thorough preparation and assessment which is further supported by a good level of ongoing high quality training. Consequently foster carers have a good understanding of their role and the needs of the children they care for.

The agency offers parent and child placements. However, although carers have access to parent and child training, there have been occasions when carers have taken such placements having not undertaken this specific training. Similarly, carers have not always had parent and child placements specified in their terms of approval. As these placements are very specific and potentially complex, formalising arrangements, such as ensuring specific terms of approval and training prior to placement, would improve the robustness of matching and placements.

Foster carers demonstrate a strong commitment to ensuring foster children feel part of the family. The agency promotes an ethos whereby 'respite' is provided by household carers, thus normalising this experience.

All carers complete the training, support and development standards within their first year of approval. This is enhanced by access to regular, relevant training. This is an area which foster carers value highly and comment that it provides useful information and strategies which they implement in practice, thereby providing better support to their children in placement. One carer commented that training is 'top notch', while another said, 'It has opened my eyes and enhanced my work.' Other areas of support which they value are the local support groups, the local budgets for social activities, the supervisory visits, the out-of-hours service, and the peer support they receive from carer ambassadors. Carers have commented that their supervising social workers have been responsive when they have needed extra support, and in the event of the social worker not being available, managers have undertaken this role. Carers also appreciate the recognition they get from the agency, such as long-service awards, which contribute to them feeling valued.

Matching is generally well considered, with no pressure on carers to accept a placement which they are unsure about. However, there are occasions when the matching report does not identify how gaps in the matching criteria will be met. For example, although carers demonstrate a commitment to promote a child's cultural heritage, the supporting documentation does not consistently highlight this as an area which was considered during the matching. This may lead to an area of unmet need.

The fostering panel is effective and thorough. The panel chair is experienced and knowledgeable, the central list reflects a good range of relevant personal and professional backgrounds, gender and culture and the panel is well administered. However, the panel minutes do not consistently specify the role of panel members, thus making it difficult to demonstrate that it is quorate. Although the panel discusses reasons for its recommendation, this could be made clearer in the minutes, as at times they are lost in a more lengthy analysis. Decision making is timely and based on full consideration of all the information.

There are good working relationships between local authority social workers, foster carers and the agency staff. The agency will provide appropriate challenge if, for example, documents such as review minutes, are not provided in a timely way.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are protected from harm because safeguarding is central to the agency's practice. For example, the agency ensures that it puts safeguarding children at the centre of its recruitment, preparation, assessment, supervision and training of foster carers. Safe caring policies are put into place and are regularly reviewed. Each fostering household has two unannounced visits a year and supervising social workers ensure they see children and young people without their foster carers at least once every six weeks.

Children and young people are encouraged to take age-appropriate risks, such as walking home from school or playing outside with their friends so that they can develop and mature. These issues are incorporated within the individual well-being plans and discussed within carer supervision; however, risk is not always separately assessed as part of an individual risk assessment. Although this has not been detrimental to any young person's well-being and safety, a more systematic approach to addressing risk adds robustness to safeguarding practice. Carers have a good understanding of internet security as this is covered in a number of training events they undertake.

Children and young people feel safe in their foster families. They have a range of avenues for raising any concerns. For example, there is clear information in their guide about the complaints procedure, advocacy and other independent sources of support. They see their carers' supervising social worker on a regular basis, in

addition to their own social worker and their independent reviewing officer. They contribute to the annual reviews of carers as well as their own looked after reviews. One recent complaint from a young person was appropriately resolved and the agency was able to take some learning points from it and amended its practice accordingly. A learning point from another issue has resulted in further improvement to practice to encourage children and young people to share their feelings. Each child and young person is provided with a stamped addressed postcard which they can send in to Compass if they are worried about something but feel unable to talk to anyone.

The agency regularly monitors any children or young people who go missing or who may be at risk of sexual exploitation. During the last year there have been a number of instances where young people have either been missing or had unauthorised absences from their placement. This has reduced significantly. The agency works well in partnership with other safeguarding agencies to ensure young people are safe and the risks are minimised. Carers are clear about their duties and responsibilities and work with young people to encourage them to keep themselves safe.

The agency responds appropriately to allegations against foster carers. It cooperates with the relevant local authority and works in partnership with the Local Authority Designated Officer. Carers recently asked for some further training in this area, which was implemented. Carers are fully supported when allegations are made and they have access to an independent agency.

The agency has appropriately robust recruitment and selection procedures which are implemented in practice, thereby ensuring that only suitable people are employed as both staff and panel members.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Since the last full inspection, when no recommendations or requirements were made, the agency has undergone a significant amount of change. Key personnel, including the responsible individual and Registered Manager have changed and there has been an increase in staff. The agency is now part of a bigger organisation. The last two years have seen a period of consolidation of the changes, with an emphasis on maintaining the standard of service while communicating and consulting with all relevant parties. There are now plans to further develop, particularly in relation to adopting a more therapeutic approach across the service, although this is in the very early stages. Other plans include further developing carers' groups and establishing a children's newsletter. Leaders, managers and staff are enthusiastic about providing a child-focused service of a high quality and their commitment to this is evident.

Leaders and managers have strong working relationships with social workers, commissioners and other professional services. Without exception, other professionals commented on how well they work together, the good communication and staff attendance at all meetings. One stakeholder said: 'Compass are responsive

to issues that arise. They have a strong focus on quality and stability.' Regular meetings with commissioners provide insight into current recruitment needs which feed into the recruitment strategy, thereby targeting particular areas. Research into successful recruitment informs practice in this regard, for example, through carers' recommendations and ongoing publicity at appropriate venues.

The agency has well-developed systems for tracking and monitoring children's and young people's outcomes. This information is reported on regularly to senior managers who take appropriate action if outcomes are poor. Monitoring arrangements are thorough and systematic, ensuring that managers at all levels of accountability are appropriately informed of every aspect of the agency's work. This includes feedback from children's and carers' consultation events and regular meetings. This affords children and carers the opportunity to express their views and influence service development.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide give clear, thorough and appropriate information so that users of the service know what to expect. This is complemented by the comprehensive foster carer handbook. Children and carers are given information about how to complain, and the agency can demonstrate that it learns from issues which have been raised, for example, young people's savings and health and safety matters.

Everyone who works for or on behalf of the agency is suitably qualified, experienced and supervised. However, supervision records are not thorough, nor do they give any indication of the time or length of the supervision. Thus the quality of the supervision cannot be readily assessed. Likewise, not all staff have had an annual appraisal of their performance, which has the potential to limit managerial oversight of their effectiveness as workers. The agency is sufficiently resourced to enable staff to fulfil the aims and objectives and provide a service of good quality. Notifications are made appropriately and follow-up action taken as necessary. Although case records are generally thorough, the agency does not maintain the children's register with sufficient detail as not all children have their previous address, or the one they are discharged to, noted on the register, which is a breach of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2001. This breach does not have an impact on children's safety or well-being.

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.