

Blue Sky Fostering

Broadwater House, Broadwater Road, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 8GT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is privately owned and operated. It currently provides in excess of 250 fostering placements for children and young people across the south of England, in short-term, long-term, parent and child, emergency, disabled children, bridging and pre-adoption placements.

In addition, the agency offers a therapeutically led care service through some of its carers. This provides placements for children who have suffered emotional abuse or trauma, or who have behavioural issues. The agency also provides direct work with families, which aims to help some children to return to live with them.

Inspection dates: 23 to 27 October 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 14 October 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- The children and young people reside in safe, stable placements that allow them to form trusting relationships with their carers and the agency staff.
- The agency has established a welcoming atmosphere in which children and young people feel as though they are part of a traditional family. Carers feel appreciated and valued.
- The views of the children and young people are an important driving force for the agency. Young people are confident that their voices are heard.
- The majority of the children and young people are making positive progress in education, with the assistance of the education advisor for the agency.
- The health needs of the children and young people are proactively met, leading to improvements in their physical well-being. Therapeutic input helps children and young people with complex needs to develop resilience to overcome difficulties.
- Activities provided by the agency have allowed children and young people to develop confidence, gain friendships and improve their social and independence skills.
- Effective monitoring practices are in place, and are taught to the staff and carers to keep children and young people very safe.
- The fostering panel is a real strength of the agency, providing an effective gatekeeping service for the agency.
- A highly effective leadership team is in place. It monitors the progress of the children and young people while developing the agency.
- The agency has established highly effective relationships with external professionals, including placing commissioners.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- Ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. (National minimum standards 26.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The children and young people placed with the agency are having extremely positive experiences. The majority of the children and young people are developing positively in their emotional, physical and developmental health. A thorough matching process means that the children and young people live in stable placements, as evidenced by the good recent stability rate. When placements end abruptly, there is a prompt review with clear learning points for future placements.

In therapeutic-led placements, a well-informed team meets regularly to implement effective therapeutic strategies which assist children and young people with complex needs to make noticeable improvements. A strength of the agency is its ability to utilise the resources available to provide therapeutic-led care to those in traditional placements, for example the use of individual workers and advice from therapists.

Children and young people are benefiting from being placed with carers who are well trained and prepared for the duties of fostering. The agency ensures that carers are recruited, assessed, trained and supervised to a high level. Carers find the training and support provided by the agency to be exceptional. A social worker wrote: 'A particularly outstanding trait of the agency is that the carers work in unison with the local authority and are able to support the children independently when needed.'

The children and young people feel welcomed and included in the wider family of their carers. They develop strong bonds with their carers, often referring to them as 'mum' and 'dad'. The children's and young people's needs are very well understood by their carers, who can therefore provide them with positive parenting and good-quality family life. A young person expressed: 'When things go wrong, the agency and my carer handle things well without making me feel a particular way, and I feel like family.'

A strength of the agency is the ability to ensure that children and young people have their voices heard. This was the consensus view of the children and young people spoken to at the inspection. They feel that their carers and the staff routinely seek their opinions about their care and the performance of the agency. A young person said, 'Everyone at the agency listens to you, and does not just talk about things with no action.'

Records reflect that the children and young people have very good attendance and perform well academically. They have ambitious goals, such as attending university. Their progress is monitored by the education advisor to the agency, who demonstrates an extensive knowledge of the educational system and how to maximise opportunities for the children and young people. Many of the young people are active participants in the Duke of Edinburgh Awards, and proudly boast of their ability to function independently with the skills that they have obtained.

The health needs of the children and young people are met to a high standard. The agency ensures that individual health assessments are in place, offering as much medical information to carers as possible. Some children and young people have experienced significant improvements in their health through regular attendance at their necessary appointments with the dentist, general practitioner and optician. Age-appropriate sexual awareness classes are offered by the agency to young people as a proactive response to answer any questions that they may have.

Disabled children and young people are placed with well-trained carers, who understand their complex needs while providing them with specialised care. On behalf of the children and young people, carers are proactive in seeking advice and challenging decisions, allowing their needs to be met to a high standard. There is an excellent example of a young person with complex needs thriving and growing in self-confidence. He has been able to achieve a level of independence by living away from home, attending college and developing friendships.

The children and young people are able to pursue their individual interests. The participation manager is extremely popular with the children and young people, due to arranging activities that are progressive and promote the development of social interaction and independence. Many of the events scheduled are agency-wide and provide the children and the young people with a chance to develop skills while coming to know each other.

Foster carers have developed significant relationships with the agency. They speak highly of the ongoing support that they receive in the form of bespoke training, informal meetings, buddy carers, supervision and annual reviews. The carers feel appreciated by the agency and believe that it places children and young people at the forefront. The biological children of carers are prioritised by the agency to ensure that their feelings are consistently obtained, and that they feel included and part of the fostering process.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

The registered manager, as the safeguarding lead for the agency, has established a proactive culture for the protection of the children and young people. Efficient monitoring and excellent links with the designated officer have helped the agency to successfully assess risk and intervene to keep children and young people safe. Instances of child sexual exploitation, missing from care and other safeguarding concerns are handled meticulously, as managers are instantly alerted for overview and intervention.

All staff are well trained in safeguarding. The manager researches the latest trends and patterns nationally and updates training methodology accordingly. The agency has adapted its own child sexual risk assessment framework so those at risk of child sexual exploitation are assessed immediately. Cue cards for interviewing children and young people when they return after having been missing have been developed and provided to carers to obtain the necessary information to help to prevent further incidents. Carers receive safeguarding training that is consistently refreshed, and

unannounced visits are conducted at above the required frequency, and this also helps to protect children and young people.

There are documents in place that clearly identify all associated risks for the children and young people, and these are reviewed regularly. These documents include safe care plans for carers to follow. These are well understood by carers, and they offer them effective management strategies. Carers evidenced that they know what to look for and how to respond in relation to all safeguarding matters. For example, there are highly effective bespoke plans for young people with fire-setting behaviour. Risk assessments are thorough and the local fire service is consulted, often speaking directly with the young people about the risk of fire.

Pre-panel approval training is excellent for carers. It provides them with the skills and knowledge to feel confident and competent for their initial placements. The training equips carers to understand behaviour as a form of communication. A high level of support is provided to meet the complex needs of the children and young people in therapy-led placements, underpinning the placement and providing a secure base for both the young people and the carers. Several young people have shown a drastic decrease in concerning behaviour through this approach.

There is an emphasis on the positive behaviours exhibited by the children and young people. The smallest achievements are rewarded and celebrated. De-escalation techniques and other strategies are taught to carers, and young people are provided with insightful guidance to manage their behaviour. Physical intervention is only used when necessary and when it can be conducted safely. Carers are taught to hold children safely when this is identified as an appropriate need. Police have not been required to manage the behaviour of the young people.

Allegations against carers are managed proportionally and escalated when necessary. There are currently no open allegations at the agency. The managers take swift action to ensure the safety of children and young people while addressing concerns. When necessary, the agency puts a stop on placements and invokes a standard of care investigation, in collaboration with the designated officer. If concerns are upheld, the agency notifies the Disclosure and Barring Service promptly.

The agency undertakes safe recruitment of new staff by following robust procedures, in which information is thoroughly reviewed. The young people's panels provide opportunities for young people to interview and select adults whom they relate and talk with to work at the agency. A thorough induction programme ensures that new staff are monitored while they undertake all training essential to safeguarding.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The leaders and managers of the agency have evidenced that they are exceptional and passionate. The agency has not rested on its laurels since the last inspection, and managers have implemented positive changes throughout that have sustained the outstanding status of the agency.

The agency is extremely child focused. An emphasis is placed on constant monitoring of the children and young people. Area managers provide a weekly overview to senior managers that allows them to remain aware of current events. The care provided to them is scrutinised to a high level by senior management. This information is reviewed by and used to address the strengths and areas of development for the agency, as evidenced by the meticulous monthly and annual monitoring reports.

There is a change planned to the designation of the role of registered manager. The agency has a succession plan in place that will play to the strengths of those involved. The current manager will be moving to the role of responsible individual and another manager at the agency will submit an application to become registered. Together, they evidenced how they have contributed to the development of the agency and maintained the high standards established.

The structure of individual offices or hubs in different areas has been implemented to provide intensive support to carers. This allows the children and young people to have their care monitored closely. The easily accessible offices provide the children's and young people's carers with a family environment in which the staff know them individually. Despite the inspection taking place during the half-term break, a high number of carers and young people were able to visit their respective hubs to offer their views and opinions of the agency.

The staff at the agency are dedicated and show a high morale. They feel valued and appreciated by the managers, and speak highly of the guidance and support received. The training, supervision and other opportunities, such as funded social work qualifications and promotions, enable staff development and effective information sharing. Additionally, managers engage the staff in an open forum and resolve any concerns that may affect their performance. Several staff stated: 'The agency is a great place to work, success is celebrated and you are allowed to express yourself without management getting defensive.'

A knowledgeable and informed recruitment manager is implementing a clear carer recruitment strategy. There are clear processes for ensuring that only the candidates whom the agency concludes have the necessary skills undertake the assessment process. The agency places quality over quantity, often refusing carers who want to transfer in from other fostering agencies if they do not meet its strict criteria. Carers expressed that the recruitment process of the agency is undertaken to make everyone feel comfortable and confident in subsequent care.

The functioning of the panel is a strength of the agency. The panel purposefully analyses information obtained from the social workers' thorough assessments. This process for potential applicants has led to reliable recommendations, reviewed by the agency decision maker. The agency ensures that new carers are supported by buddy carers and have no health and safety concerns, and that all mandatory training is completed prior to any young people being placed.

The statement of purpose captures the ethos of the agency effectively and is available on the company website, along with a children's guide for those under 12

and another for those over 12. The agency is achieving its aims and objectives effectively, in part due to being highly resourced. The agency has a strong social media presence that enables young people and carers to contact the agency discreetly through their Facebook account.

The agency has established an excellent reputation with commissioners and social workers. A social worker confirmed the impact of the agency on the children and young people by writing: 'The agency ensures that all paperwork is in place, (there is) representation at all meetings, problems are addressed in a timely manner with safeguarding in place. In addition, carers have specific training to meet the needs of individual children and young people.'

There is one recommendation as a result of the inspection. Some discussions that had resulted in decisions being made regarding the children and young people were not clearly recorded. The manager acknowledged this concern and agreed with the recommendation to improve the quality of documentation.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people, and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC064220

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