

Fostering Solutions

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Sharon Lloyd
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is part of a national provider. It operates from a head office and four subsidiary offices. It currently provides over 280 fostering households offering placements for up to 680 children in a range of placements including short and long-term, short break, parent and child, and respite placements.

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**

Children are looked after in families that provide warm, nurturing care. They feel welcome, part of the family and the vast majority make good and very good overall progress. An increasing number of children remain with their foster families in the long term and benefit from stable, secure family life. Feedback from over 30 children about their care experience is, for the most part, extremely positive.

The agency is well led by a competent Registered Manager who has very good oversight of the service. Staff receive effective support and supervision which enables them to provide carers with the support, supervision and training they need; this in turn promotes good quality care for children. Foster carers are extremely satisfied with the way the agency supports them to care for children and promote good outcomes.

Children’s views are listened to and they contribute to both the development of the service and to their own plans. Foster carers are involved in decisions about children and take an active role in promoting good outcomes for children; especially in education and health where outcomes are strong. Children enjoy and benefit from the many and varied opportunities to have fun and to develop their social and other skills. Their mental health is well supported through working with the agency’s psychologist. This is of particular benefit to those children awaiting a service from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team and those whose level of anxiety is expressed through challenging and dangerous behaviour.

Panel arrangements are good and quality assurance is effective. The quality of assessments and foster carer reviews is variable. The agency has taken action to address this by recruiting specialist assessors and introducing new systems and training to improve the quality and efficacy of assessment work. The new arrangements are in their early stages and have not yet been tested.

The agency has grown significantly since the last inspection and has recruited carers with a variety of skills. It provides a range of care placements for children, including those needing short break care and parent and child placements. It has increased its capacity to look after children with complex and challenging behavioural needs but 12% of children had unplanned placement endings in 2014-2015. More needs to be done to ensure these children are matched with families who have the high level of knowledge and skills necessary to provide them with stable and successful placements.

In a minority of cases, information received at the point of placement has not been used to good effect to inform placement planning and risk assessments. This undermines the quality of children’s individual risk assessments and can pose a threat to their health and safety. The quality of reporting is variable. This means that the agency’s records do not always reflect the good work undertaken and the progress children make.

Despite the introduction of e-profiles, which enables details and photographs about foster families to be shared with children before placement, children do not always receive this information and this causes them unnecessary anxiety. Not all children know about the agency’s webpages where information about the agency is available for them.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
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The registered person in respect of a fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a))	30/09/2015
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Recommendations

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

ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for (NMS 20.8)

ensure that foster carers receive guidance and training to provide appropriate care if looking after children with complex health needs (NMS 6.8)

ensure that each foster carer is aware of all the necessary information available to the fostering service about a child's circumstances. The fostering service follows up with the responsible authority where all such necessary information has not been provided by the authority (NMS 3.9)

ensure that the systems for introducing children into the foster care placement are implemented fully so that children receive helpful information about the foster family prior to placement (NMS 11.1)

improve the systems for monitoring the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed to ensure records accurately reflect children's progress and any action taken by the agency (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are extremely positive about their foster families and speak highly of the support they receive; many report the best thing about their foster family is feeling loved. Typical comments include, 'They are very supportive through hard times and I have always felt part of the family,' and, 'J is always there for me.'

Children recognise how being in foster care has helped them to achieve better educational outcomes. For example, one said: 'My grades shot up. I couldn't do maths before but now I'm good at it. Within two months, my brother learned to read.' Another said, 'I never went to school much so I was behind. I'm now at 4A in maths.'

Foster carers are fully engaged in supporting children's education and 96% of carers contribute to children's Personal Education Plans. A strong focus on education supports children to catch up on previously missed work, especially taking into account their previous experiences. School attendance and achievement levels are very high, with 100% attendance in the first half of 2015. The numbers of children achieving one or more GCSEs in 2014 was 84%, of whom 46% achieved at least five GCSEs grade A* - C compared to the national average of 63.8% for all children. This shows the agency is supporting children to close the gap between children in care and their peers. Almost all children over 16 are in education or training and this helps to prepare them for future economic viability and success in the workplace. The agency recognises children's successes in its regular foster care magazine as well as displays in office reception areas and through individual letters of congratulations to children. This celebration helps children to value their achievements and builds self-esteem.

Children receive good support with their social development. They enjoy annual outings with other foster carers and fostered children. They enjoy having fun together as a group and say 'it is good to get to know other children in care so you know you are not the only one.' Children speak with excitement and enthusiasm about new experiences they have had, including trips to Blackpool, Chester Zoo, the cinema and holidays. They report that foster carers 'make life fun,' and some talked about how good it is to be in a relaxed and happy household, 'away from the family arguments,' and with 'a different smell because there's no smoke.' 87% of children participate in enjoyable extra-curricular activities and this helps them to develop confidence, learn new skills, improve their social interaction with peers and be overall more satisfied with their lives.

The agency provides foster families for a number of sibling groups and this supports children's emotional security and sense of belonging. Siblings who live together expressed high levels of satisfaction with their placements. The agency facilitates contact between siblings who are separated and most said they were happy with the level of contact and had been part of the decision-making about contact with their families. They know their contact arrangements and the reasons for any restrictions. The agency supports children well to rebuild relationships with family. One young person explained, 'Seeing my family again after five years makes me scared and happy.' She explained how this is being well managed and supported through small steps towards unsupervised contact, at her pace.

Children receive the physical health services they require. To combat delays for some children in accessing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, the agency's psychologist provides short term support through individual sessions to some children and their carers. This helps to sustain children's placements and helps to promote improved mental health. In addition, the agency provides group sessions for foster carers which help them develop an improved understanding and awareness of children's emotional difficulties and how best to support them. Approximately 20% of fostering households have benefited from this training which has been successful in helping foster carers to provide more nurturing family life with clearer boundaries

and improved behaviour and anxiety management strategies. It has helped to achieve placement stability for a number of children presenting challenging behaviour as a result of their emotional distress and early trauma.

Most children report they feel listened to. For example, one said, 'They talk to us separately and sort things out' and another said 'it's good to have an independent visitor who, takes me out and talks to me.' Children say they contribute to decisions about their care and their day to day lives. They give their views about their carers and receive encouragement to be open about any concerns they may have. This helps them to feel valued and confident that they have an influence on the way they are looked after. Many children provide valuable feedback for foster carer reviews and this enables continuous review of the quality of care to individual children. Most feel that when they make a complaint, their views are taken seriously. One explained how she did not feel at home with her previous carer and after a year in placement, she told her Guardian ad Litem that she was not happy. The professionals listened to her and arranged for her to move to another family, where she is now very settled and happy.

The agency runs a number of groups for children. This enables them to develop new friendships with other children in care and promotes their contribution to the development of the agency. Only a small percentage of children participate in the groups and the agency recognises it needs to do more to engage with a wider group of children. Those children involved speak positively about the groups and value the opportunity to influence new developments. One explained, 'They listen to our ideas and we are developing a leaflet to encourage more children to join.' Some young people have been involved in the recruitment of new staff for the service and recognise the benefits this positive experience brings to both the individual young people and the agency.

Children with specific communication needs receive additional support to ensure they are able to express their views and feelings. For example, an asylum seeking young person for whom English is not their first language, has daily English tuition and the use of a laptop to assist with day to day communication with carers. This reduces the young person's sense of isolation in a new country and enables him to understand and influence his care plans.

Although the agency has a webpage for children, not all children are aware of it and attempts to engage with children through electronic means have so far not been very successful. The further development of this as a means of providing opportunities for children to have their say is a work in progress.

The agency has taken steps to provide children with helpful information about their new foster families before they move in and those children who have benefited from this report it helped them enormously to settle in their new placements quickly. However, the arrangements are not yet fully effective, particularly for children who move as an emergency. Consequently, a number of children identified this as an area the agency needs to improve. One young person explained that moving to a foster family 'felt like I was being abducted – kidnapped by people I didn't even know.'

Others talked about how frightening it was when they first move in with a family they had never met and knew nothing about. 'I felt frightened at first and wanted to run away. I locked myself in my room. I couldn't eat or sleep.'

The majority of children benefit from stable placements where they make good overall progress and have improving outcomes. The agency is increasingly providing care for children with complex emotional and behavioural needs and many of these children settle well with their foster families and benefit from stable and nurturing family life. However, the number of children having unplanned moves from their foster families has increased each year to 74 in the year ending March 2015, which was 12% of all placements that year. Although many of these are instigated by the placing authority, in many cases this is because foster carers are unable to keep children safe and reduce their challenging and dangerous behaviour. Moving in this way negatively impacts on children's emotional wellbeing and perpetuates their feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. The agency recognises the need to reduce the number of unplanned endings and holds disruption meetings in order to learn lessons for the future. It has taken steps to improve matching and in some cases, to train foster carer's to provide more emotionally supportive placements and to manage challenging behaviour more effectively.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency's recruitment strategy is successful in continuing to grow and develop the service. They recruit carers with a wide range of skills who can meet the diverse needs of children in care or those who require a short break service. There has been a significant increase in the number of children in long term placements rising in March 2015, to 173 children with a further 180 in short term placements. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to providing children coming into care with suitable families and those remaining in care with long-term, stable placements. A small number of carers exclusively provide short breaks and this aspect of the service provision continues to be developed.

Successful recruitment campaigns include open days, attendance at local events and website recruitment. Approximately 80% of foster carers are white Caucasian and the remaining 20% are Black, Asian, Chinese and mixed race. This restricts the agency's capacity to provide foster homes for children with families of similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with the exception of White and Asian or Asian British backgrounds. The vast majority of children are, however, placed with carers of a similar ethnic and cultural background to their own which promotes their identity and sense of belonging.

The timeliness of responses to enquiries, initial visits and assessments is good. The agency receives a very high number of enquiries and its fast response ensures that potential carers are quickly provided with the information they need to determine whether to proceed with an application to foster.

The agency has clear guidelines for completing foster carer assessments in good time. However, the quality of assessments is variable and this has meant that a small minority of foster carers have been approved whose strengths and difficulties have not been fully explored and evaluated at the high standard desired by the agency.

The agency has a strong fostering panel that provides appropriate challenge and scrutiny of assessments and foster carer reviews. It has been well led by a competent and experienced chairperson who has recently resigned. It has made significant contributions to the development of the service through its robust quality assurance of assessments and annual review reports. For example, it routinely raises concerns where foster carers have not completed the core training in good time and where children's views have not been ascertained as part of the review. Where assessments have not shown detailed analysis and full consideration of the potential impact of the applicants' life experiences on children who may be placed with them, the panel has deferred making a recommendation until sufficient information is presented. This has promoted the agency's overhaul of its assessment and reporting processes. A new panel chair and a new agency decision maker have recently been appointed. They are suitably experienced and qualified for their roles.

An internal review and evaluation of the assessment process has led the agency to reorganise its workforce in 2014/2015. To improve the quality of assessments, the agency has recruited a number of specialist assessors who are being trained to focus on thorough, deep assessment and evaluation. The assessors are qualified, experienced and knowledgeable social workers who understand the high expectations of the agency. Caseloads are manageable and supervision is good. This is a new role and the impact of the changes on the quality of assessments is not yet tested.

Foster carers receive good quality preparation and information about the agency. A buddy system enables those going through the assessment process to have access to an experienced and competent foster carer who can provide additional support and answer queries. New carers report this is a valuable resource.

Sixty nine fostering families responded to the Ofsted survey in 2015. Of these, 96% said they are well trained and supported by the agency. For example, the following is a typical comment from a foster carer: 'I have regular supervision and can talk to my supervising social worker. If I have a problem, I can discuss this with a member of the team if my social worker is not available. There is lots of essential and very useful training and updates on training. I feel that I am part of a professional team with my views listened to.' In describing the quality of the training provided, foster carers say it is 'fantastic, comprehensive, brilliant, first class.' Most but not all report it is held at convenient times and locations. A few experienced and long-standing carers report that the training is repetitive. The agency is aware of this and is taking

steps to make training more accessible and more varied.

92% of carers have completed the training, support and development standards for foster care within 12 months of approval, so they have been trained to a basic level in caring for children they foster. Most, but not all, have also completed a core training programme set by the agency within their first 12 months. This is monitored by supervising social workers who follow up with individual foster families to help them reflect on the training they undertake and assess their level of understanding and learning.

The agency clearly values training and recognises the importance of continuous professional development in equipping carers to provide good quality care. However, robust monitoring of foster carers' engagement in training is not evident in every case. Consequently, not all carers have received training to meet the identified needs of the children they look after. For example, some carers looking after children with specific health needs have not been given all the information and training required to do so safely. Some looking after children who display challenging behaviour, misuse drugs or who are approaching adulthood are not fully informed and trained to provide the best possible care, support and advice to those children. This has threatened children's health and safety in some instances.

For the most part, the agency effectively supports foster carers to provide high quality care. Foster carers are exceedingly satisfied with the supervision and support provided by supervising social workers and bi-monthly support groups. For example, one foster carer said, 'We receive and have always received excellent support from our supervising social worker and our regional manager, which is backed up by the fostering service. When in difficult times with a placement the support is increased to a level which makes you feel that there is always someone there to offer advice and guidance...phone calls in the late evenings, weekends and even when the supervising social worker was away on holiday. This really gives you a sense of having a high level of support.'

The number of support workers who are available to support children presenting complex needs and challenging behaviour has increased. This means that more foster families have access to practical support and advice in times of crisis. In addition, the agency contracts with a group of experienced and knowledgeable foster carers who link with foster families to provide additional support and guidance. This is a valuable resource that helps prevent placement breakdown and helps new carers to develop confidence and skills. The agency recognises there is an increasing demand for this work, especially since it provides families for higher numbers of children with complex behavioural needs. It keeps under review the number of support workers required and the impact of their interventions. There is good evidence of children benefiting from this additional support.

The agency's relationships with local authorities for whom it provides a service are strong and well-established. For the most part, partnership working effectively supports children to have safe and successful placements. Most foster carers feel they are a valued part of the team around the child. Most placing social workers and

independent reviewing officers expressed satisfaction with the quality of service provided and children's overall progress. 25% of foster carers said they do not receive all the information they need at the point of placement to help them look after a child. The agency recognises this is a challenge and is pro-active in chasing missing information and review reports, with some success. The arrangements for delegated authority are clear and foster carers know them although a small minority do not understand them fully. For example, a child who had a friend for an overnight stay was not allowed to share her bedroom with her friend because the foster carer did not risk assess the situation and wrongly thought this was not allowed.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Robust recruitment procedures protect children as far as possible from the risk of harm from unsuitable persons. Children report they feel safe in their foster homes and are very positive about their experiences of living with their carers. Placing social workers are impressed with the agency's ability to keep children safe. For example, one said, 'This is an exceptional service at keeping children safe. The children report feelings of being safe and demonstrate this with their behaviour.' Local authority designated officers for safeguarding report no concerns about the agency.

The agency has a strong focus on children's safety. The registered manager is the designated officer for safeguarding and leads on supporting children at risk of sexual exploitation. She has effective monitoring systems that enable her to have a very good overview of any child protection or safeguarding concerns. She works closely with the organisation's national safeguarding manager and provides quarterly reports to the board demonstrating close scrutiny of incidents and fair evaluation of the agency's practice. This enables a good overview of the effectiveness of agency's safeguarding strategies and how well the agency is meeting individual children's safety needs.

Foster carers take action to protect children from bullying and report concerns about other professionals in line with good whistle-blowing procedures. For example, a foster carer reported concerns about the use of restraint in a child's school that had led to injuries and this was fully investigated by the local authority and led to changes in the school's practice. The child reported he was satisfied with the way the incident was managed.

Notifications of serious events are appropriately referred to relevant agencies, including the local authority designated officer, safeguarding teams, the police and Ofsted. The quality of notifications has improved and most demonstrate the agency takes robust action to protect children following a safety concern.

Providing families for increasing numbers of children with a history of complex and dangerous behaviour has led to a greater emphasis on training staff and foster

carers to protect children at risk of going missing, self-harm and sexual exploitation. As a result, carers and staff are more aware of the safety risks to children who use social media and those who go missing; also, foster carers are more closely monitoring and reporting on children's contact with family and friends, with a clear focus on keeping children safe. A foster carer reported, 'If necessary, extra meetings are called so that information can be shared appropriately to support foster carers and children.'

There has been a marked increase since the last inspection in the number of children looked after by the agency who are deemed to be at risk of child sexual exploitation, (CSE). In 2014-15 there were 20 children known to be at risk, who between them, went missing a total of 63 times. The registered manager maintains close scrutiny of children at risk of sexual exploitation and ensures that suitable action is taken and kept under review to promote the child's future safety and inform practice across the agency. Supervising social workers attend safeguarding strategy meetings and contribute to CSE plans aimed at promoting the safety of those children at risk.

Partnership working with other agencies is mostly effective in promoting the safety of children who go missing from care and minimising the risks to those children at risk of sexual exploitation. The number of incidents of children going missing is reducing over time. The agency monitors the reasons for children going missing and the majority of incidents relate to children wanting more contact with family and friends. In these circumstances, the agency has prompted a review of the placing authority's contact arrangements to ensure they fully take account of the child's wishes and feelings.

Return interviews are not routinely undertaken by an independent person when a child returns from being missing. Consequently, children do not always have the opportunity to explain the reasons they have been missing and this does not ensure the best possible protection for children with dangerous risk-taking behaviour. The agency continues to remind placing authorities of their duty to carry out these interviews but with varying levels of success. In some circumstances, the agency has arranged independent interviews and on one occasion this enabled a child to share information about abuse that occurred while missing and subsequently led to the prosecution of a sex offender. In others circumstances, there has been a lack of prompt and robust analysis and reflection on the reasons why a child has been missing and what more can be done to prevent further incidents. This means that the opportunity to better protect a child may be lost. For example, independent interviews have not routinely taken place with one young person and crucial information has been overlooked. This has resulted in him continuing to stay out until late at night and his whereabouts have been unknown. His health and safety have been compromised and the foster carers have served notice on his placement, as they feel they cannot protect him.

Risk assessments relating to individual children do not always identify all the risks to a child's safety. For example, the risks of accessing inappropriate materials on television or through social media are not always fully assessed at the start of a

placement for those children with a known history of exposure to unsuitable images. This does not fully protect these children. Individual risk assessments are usually reviewed annually. Some are reviewed intermittently to take account of newly identified safety risks. However, this practice is inconsistent and falls short of ensuring the best possible measures are in place to fully protect every child.

Information shared at the point of placement informs placement planning and risk assessment. However, placement plans and risk assessments do not always reflect all of the information available and this can threaten children's safety. For example, in one instance, risks to a child's health and safety resulting from a long term health condition were not fully considered in the day to day care arrangements for the children living in the foster home. Consequently, action to reduce some risks to children's safety was not taken until after an incident that threatened a child's safety and wellbeing. Even then, the action taken was limited and did not demonstrate robust analysis of risk so that some avoidable risks remain. This means that in a small number of cases, the agency has not taken sufficiently robust action that fully promotes children's safety and welfare.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

A strong and effective registered manager leads the staff team. She is suitably qualified, experienced and knowledgeable. She has worked in social care for over 20 years and has been the registered manager of this agency for over three years. Her strong leadership and drive to develop the agency and improve children's lives is resulting in all round improvements in the quality of care and outcomes for children. There are clear lines of accountability and excellent scrutiny of management information that drives improvement not only in this agency but in the organisation as a whole. The manager is assisted by team leaders who take responsibility for delivering the service from each of the five area offices. They track children's progress and outcomes and provide regular reports to the registered manager so that she is fully informed about the operation of the service, the quality of care and any shortfalls in practice.

The registered manager regularly reviews the performance of the agency and outcomes for individual children, taking into account any trends or patterns and this drives continuous improvement. Steps have been taken to address the three recommendations for good practice that were made following the last inspection. The level of support to foster carers who look after children with very challenging behaviour has been increased and most foster carers report this is good. However, this is a work in progress and the agency recognises that more needs to be done to promote placement stability and reduce the number of placement breakdowns for

these children. It is an ongoing challenge to obtain care plans and other important information prior to or at the point of each placement, particularly when children move in an emergency. The registered manager continues to remind placing authorities of the importance of providing foster carers with the information they need to care effectively for the children as soon as they move into a foster family. The agency has improved the arrangements for searching a child's bedroom, to make sure that room searches are done only in accordance with the agency's policy, openly and transparently, with the full knowledge of the child and placing authority.

The rapid and significant growth of the agency has led to a reassessment of the capacity of the registered manager to continue driving improvement in what has become a very large agency. In particular, the organisation recognises the challenge the registered manager faces in developing the service further while maintaining the high level of scrutiny and monitoring required to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children. Plans are in place to address this.

The agency operates in accordance with its Statement of Purpose. Information for foster carers and for prospective carers, parents and commissioners is available on the website, which has restricted levels of access to ensure the safety of information. Foster carers have easy electronic access to the foster carer handbook, the agency's policies and procedures, training information and newsletters. They are encouraged to use the website and this helps foster carers to stay informed about changes and developments. A copy of the children's guide is also available on the website but not all children are aware of this. Children confirmed they know how to make a complaint and are confident they would be listened to.

There is a clearly defined staff structure that ensures the free-flow of information within the organisation. Staff report they receive good quality and regular training, supervision and support. Improving performance management arrangements are supporting the staff team to further develop their skills so that they can be more effective in their roles. The registered manager is a visible leader, spending time each week in each of the area offices so that she has first-hand knowledge of the staff team and pertinent issues for the area. The registered manager is appropriately supervised by the responsible individual, who is an experienced and competent manager, with a national role as Director of Operations and Safeguarding.

Monthly reports on children's progress are provided to placing social workers. The quality is variable and some are repetitive and difficult to follow. They do not always reflect the progress children have made that month. The agency has recognised the shortfalls in its reporting systems and managers have devised new templates and documentation which are about to be rolled out across the agency following a successful trial period in the Liverpool area office.

The agency's records of foster carer supervision are not always sufficiently detailed to demonstrate the quality of the work that is clearly evident. Some reports are repetitive and do not show that pertinent issues have been discussed and that foster carers dealing with challenging children have been well advised and supported. This

means the agency's records do not reflect the good work that is taking place.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 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.