

Fostering Solutions Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Rachel Britten
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering Solutions is a limited company large independent fostering service. It operates in England, Scotland and Wales under several different registrations. This service currently covers the midlands. Work is coordinated from Stafford with satellite offices in Long Eaton and Oundle. At the time of inspection, the fostering agency has 242 carers in 135 households. There are 181 children and young people placed. The volume of recruitment is significant, particularly in the Long Eaton branch, where there are now 91 carers across 50 households. The services provided include carer assessment and long term, short term, respite and 'staying put' fostering arrangements.

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 and young people make good progress in foster care. They experience safe, nurturing care from well supported foster carers. They enjoy stability; a wealth of happy and positive family relationships; good chances to expand their horizons; and help to achieve the best they can in education, health and independence. Children and young people feel part of the fostering family. Many of them live with their own brothers or sisters. Many young people are staying put with their carers past the age of 18.

Carers enjoy good levels of training, advice and support from the agency. They feel part of the fostering team, even though the agency does not always communicate information to best effect. Carers are well trained about the areas of vulnerability

that children and young people face and they receive timely and expert therapeutic advice when necessary. Carers and their own children have trusting relationships with their supervising social workers. They find supervising social workers and family support workers to be highly committed and very available.

Overall, children and young people are safe and well protected despite the increase in numbers of children and young people coming into the service with complex behaviour difficulties and/or learning disabilities. The numbers of vulnerable children and young people going missing are similar to those found nationally, as are the numbers of children and young people experiencing unplanned endings to their placement. Children and young people rarely complain or make allegations about their care because they feel safe and confident to talk to their carers and to their carers' supervising social worker.

The service has been registered for many years and has an outstanding track record. It has expanded and restructured considerably since the last inspection in 2012. In particular, the registered individual oversaw the introduction of new arrangements for carer assessment; carers' ongoing training; the matching of referrals; and all panel functions. Overall, these arrangements are highly effective and they retain the best interests of children and young people at the centre of all the agency does. The registered manager is visible and approachable to all. She is an effective leader. She prioritises concerns and safeguarding issues diligently and conducts detailed quarterly monitoring activity that the governance board scrutinises. However, local trends, patterns and clear messages for improvement are not identified timely or communicated effectively enough to ensure an outstanding service.

A large social care provider with a portfolio of numerous fostering agencies now owns the service. The provider has plans to register the Stafford, Oundle and Long Eaton offices as separate agencies during 2016. Operations managers in each location will be replaced by a registered manager to run each office as a separate fostering service.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which is helpful to the child when they access their files, both now, or in the future (NMS 26.6)

extend the use of the guidance in order to better inform carers about approval decisions: 'It is good discipline and appropriate for the decision maker to: state (a) the adopted reasons by cross reference or otherwise and (b) any further reasons for their decision' (Volume 4, statutory guidance, page 46, paragraph 5.40)

ensure that a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of any action and the conclusions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file. A copy is provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded (NMS 22.7)

ensure that carers understand how safer caring principles should be applied in such a way that meets the needs of individual children (NMS 20.9)

ensure that monitoring of all records effectively identifies both concerns about specific incidents and patterns and trends, allowing immediate action to be taken about the issues identified. (NMS 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people enjoy stable and appropriate placements where they achieve their potential. They lead healthier lifestyles and go on to achieve in the world of work and adult life. For example, children and young people achieve and maintain healthy body weights; they join sports and community clubs; they become young leaders and go away on camps; they learn to drive and they become confident to behave safely and appropriately in social situations with peers and adults. Children and young people are placed with their brothers and sisters whenever this is in their best interest. Young people say: 'I am fine in foster care'; 'I am great and healthy and do lots of activities'; 'they let us have our love and understanding. We are happy.'

Children and young people are made welcome when they move into their foster homes. Most of them say that they receive helpful information about the way their carers live and know what their bedroom will look like. This helps them know what to expect and settle in quickly. Most children and young people understand their care plan and are confident that they will not have to move again for as long as they need the care and support that is provided. Many children and young people have been in placement for a number of years. One young person said, 'I used to be really bad, but they are willing to put in the effort - it feels good knowing they've agreed to be permanent and you can't move me.' Other young people who move on to independent living receive continuing emotional and practical support, such as help with laundry and a daily meal after work.

Children and young people benefit from a wide range of opportunities and make good progress towards developing a positive identity. One young person said, 'They trust me, care for me, make me feel happy, and I can be myself.'

Children and young people enjoy holidays, hobbies, community activities and family outings. They also enjoy living in homes where carers have thought about how to make the house feel calm and nurturing, for example with sensory lights and toys. Children and young people also receive very significant direct support from agency staff when this will help them. For example, foster children and the carer's own children are taken out for treats, activities, and a chance for quality adult time if a carer's time is being taken up with particular issues for another child in the family. A young person said, 'the family support worker and supervising social workers go out of their way to make sure you're supported. I was in a pretty dark place and I don't think I'd have got through it without the agency staff.'

Children and young people thrive in their placements. Their outcomes in education, health, safety and well-being improve. A local authority placing social worker said, 'my young person is very settled and foster carers are good at building his self-esteem, confidence and personal hygiene.' Other social workers report sibling groups thriving in all areas of education, health, safety and well-being because carers are sensitive and supportive in the way they manage issues. For example, a carer household often uses the 24 hour news channel to prompt discussions with young people. Carers focus on building up self-confidence to study and learn. They have successfully helped their young person turn away from anti-social behaviour and gang culture and re-engage full time in school after a long time out of education. Another young person said that the agency family support worker helped her catch up with her assignments so that she achieved a pass in her BTEC health and social care. Children and young people with educational needs receive good advocacy from the agency and their carers to ensure that their needs are properly assessed and the right help provided. Tutors are hired too, where children and young people need specific help with particular subjects, for example, to achieve the grades for sixth form and university.

Children and young people know little about the records being kept about them. Carers and agency workers do not use a range of recording formats that are readable and understandable to children and young people. Children and young people do not have a sense of what plans and safeguards are apply to them and how these help them progress. This makes it more difficult for them to discuss issues with their carers and know the reasons why things are done the way they are. The outcomes for children and young people are good despite this, but there is a missed opportunity to engage children and young people more, for example, in their care plans; behaviour agreements and progress targets.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides effective social work and good recruitment, assessment, preparation, support, training and supervision of foster carers. This demonstrably assists children and young people's progress and improves their outcomes. The agency attracts, recruits and retains a range of foster carers who are of good calibre and can meet the needs of looked after children and young people well. Many carers, including those new to fostering, offer good quality placements to children with learning disabilities and complex difficulties. This includes sibling groups; baby and young person placements; young people who are vulnerable to exploitation and young people who are on remand.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the fostering agency. This continues annually as all carers are re-presented to panel as part of their annual review process. The panel advisor, chair and agency decision maker provide clear professional challenge and insist upon robust practice that meets regulatory requirements and keeps children central to their work. They make effective recommendations and decisions based on carers' skills and aptitudes, strengths and possible weaknesses. However, the decision maker does not communicate specifically and in enough detail to carers about these and any actions that need to be taken. Letters from the decision maker are generic, containing only the approval range decided upon. This is a missed opportunity to enable carers to gain maximum benefit from the professional insights of the service at approval and re-approval stages.

The assessment and preparation of new carers is now carried out by a specialist segment of the agency. This has improved the quality and timeliness with which new carers come on board. Following approval, new carers experience handover to their allocated supervising social worker. The supervising social worker works hard from the outset to establish a positive working relationship with new carers and this is crucial to the success of their first placements.

The process of matching new carers with children and young people has also altered since the last inspection. It is now the sole role of a few key experienced social work manager level staff who work in close liaison with local authorities and supervising social workers. Staff responsible for leading on matching are well informed about children's individual needs and the skills necessary to support them. They pursue gaps in information with local authorities and always make decisions in children's best interests. They make a good contribution to the stability of placements and the retention of foster

carers.

Children and young people receive good help to keep in touch with their birth families. This is because carers succeed in helping them feel part of their family yet also provide flexible, careful and child-centred help to maintain contact with their birth families. They plan activities and venues for contact visits with care and insight, making things comfortable and easy for everyone to get along. Birth parents said: 'Nobody's judging you for your past'; 'They think about the children'; 'We clicked.' Particular situations, for example, young people's wishes to be baptised, are carefully planned to ensure birth families are included and children's feelings are central. Young people's changing and individual wishes and feelings about contact with their birth families are heard and acted upon: contact increases, decreases or changes in ways that give children and young people a full voice. Family relationships are therefore as positive and enjoyable as possible and children enjoy being all together.

Foster carers have access to a high quality training programme and good social work support. This means that children thrive in their placements. Carers' supervising social workers play an intrinsic role in enthusing and supporting carers to attend specialist, relevant training, particularly in behaviour management and attachment. Supervising social workers inform carers well about on-line training which boosts the face-to-face courses offered. They advise and provide information to carers about the issues young people face, including safe internet use and social networking; protecting themselves from bullying and exploitation; sexuality and relationships; self-harm, drug and alcohol misuse. All but 8% of foster carers have achieved the training, support and development standards in foster care within one year of approval. A new carer said, 'support was fantastic in our first year – superb delivery of training was particularly impressive, enormously relevant and helpful to our fostering task. Support from staff, including the operations manager and out of hours cover was over and above expectation.'

Foster carers benefit from professional, supportive and enduring relationships with the agency. These relationships directly benefit children and young people too, because they know that these professionals demonstrably care about them and spend time with them. Family support workers provide practical support to placements, for example, by taking and collecting a foster child to and from school due to severe and challenging behaviour. Sessions with the clinical psychologist for carers and their own children help foster families understand why looked after children and young people are the way they are. Supervising social workers provide additional supervision, phone calls and spend more time with fostering households when they are experiencing challenging times. All carers receive regular supervision and access to numerous support group activities. Respite foster care is used with sensitivity and is used only in children's best interests, for example as part of their wider fostering family. Another example concerns a sibling group of three children

who went to live with their respite family a few years ago when the main foster carers were unable to continue fostering. The transition was smooth and well matched. The three children are settled and stable living long term with their former respite family.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency managers and administrators operate safe recruitment procedures robustly across the board for staff and carers alike. This helps prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children. Foster carers' preparation, supervision and training also has a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. This means that carers are well prepared for the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people. They understand that placement plans, risk assessments, safe care plans and delegated authority agreements must ensure that children and young people feel safe and are safe. They understand that these documents must be kept under review, so that children are well protected, but can grow up to take appropriate risks and become independent and equipped to stay safe.

Allegations, complaints and disclosures about possible abuse or harm are referred immediately to local authority child protection services. The agency also protects and supports the children, young people and carers involved, and helps to ensure that decisions are focused on children's needs. For example, a carer said, 'I was supported in a very positive way by the duty social worker when my supervising social worker was on leave, and it really helped me manage an ongoing situation which was raising safeguarding concerns for the parent and child placement I have.' Children and young people do not move unnecessarily from stable placements when allegations are raised about carers' previous placements. However, when investigations into allegations about carers are completed, the agency is not promptly compiling a summary to carers containing details of the allegation, how it was followed up and the decisions reached. This has not adversely affected the safe care that children and young people receive. Nevertheless, it is a lapse in the usually good quality, respectful service carers get from the agency.

Children and young people know who they can talk to about their concerns and worries. Carers play a major role in helping children and young people be aware of risk and to stay safe at home, school and in the community. The agency support this work well, providing practical advice, information and venues for children to discuss risky situations and behaviour, for example, safe internet use; safe sex and relationships and road safety. Carer households evolve safe caring policies alongside their supervising social worker that take

account of children's individual experiences and include other professionals, for example, teachers, as appropriate. However, some carers are confused about how safe care principles should be applied and do not understand clearly enough what they should be doing in practice. For example, many carers are confused about when and if they can have foster children sleep in with them and/or their own children when on holiday or visiting relatives. Some carers have not had clear enough discussions about internet safety, for example, as it is likely to apply to young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers. Some carers are not clear about the safeguarding importance of notifying the agency about new members of their households and getting them checked. There is a risk that children and young people's safety or freedoms are compromised when carers are not completely clear.

The incidence of children and young people going missing and being at risk is monitored rigorously. The agency provides carer households with advice, support and training to assist them with this challenging work. Remand scheme carers get specific training about: gang culture; gun crime; drug and alcohol misuse; and missing and trafficked children. A local authority social worker said, 'my young person was at risk of sexual exploitation and needed firm support in place. This was offered at every turn. I would thoroughly recommend the service as a first choice provider if it was up to me!' Carers are proactive and look for young people who go missing. They work well with police and local authority social workers, following agreed reporting protocols. Carers make good efforts to communicate with young people about what is happening and how it is affecting their future life chances. They show young people that they care. In a number of cases, carers have successfully engaged young people and they have progressed away from going missing and unsafe and/or anti-social behaviour.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The statement of purpose has been improved to provide better information about the three branches that make up the agency and how the structures of the organisation work in respect of the training, assessment, matching, and panel arms. The children's guide, information about carers, and various goodie boxes all provide friendly and suitable advice for children and young people coming into foster care here. This means children and young people, parents and relatives and staff are clear about the aims and objectives of the agency.

The registered manager, operations managers and supervising social workers have highly effective working relationships with placing authorities. Placing

authorities have confidence that carers are sufficiently skilled and well supported to provide children and young people with good care even when their needs are complex. Agency managers have high expectations about the quality of information and service that local authorities must supply. They usually challenge local authorities if case histories, care planning requirements, or details about children's needs and behaviours are not made available in a timely way. They believe this reduces the likelihood of inappropriate matches and placement breakdowns, particularly with new foster carers. This is because the agency can tailor specific support and training in good time to upskill carers and improve the care and progress of children and young people.

Leaders and managers provide children and young people with social events to have fun and to get their views. They conduct quarterly reviews of all aspects of children's outcomes and the service as a whole. They act on recommendations made by the regulator, both at and between inspections. They did not complete Ofsted's annual survey during 2015 due to a manager oversight, but they promptly complete and submit annual quality and performance data to Ofsted. They are beginning to track individual children and young people's progress and outcomes through a new 'outcome card' document. This has only just begun and supervising social workers are completing this with varying degrees of insight and skill.

The registered manager has a good understanding about the skills, strengths and difficulties of all the carer households in the agency. She and the operations managers make home visits to all carers each year and are a visible point of contact at support groups, social events and training. The manager maintains a regular presence in each of the three offices and works effectively with the three operations managers to monitor incidents and issues. This means she has a good grasp of all individual cases where issues such as placement breakdown; complaints or safeguarding issues have occurred.

Manager analysis of trends and patterns in the service is under-developed. For example, managers do not know if there are trends or patterns to be learnt about placement breakdown. They are not sure if there are problems around accepting referrals that are too challenging for particular carers; whether the preparation of new carers needs more work; whether terms of approval should be less generic for new carers; or whether supervising social workers need to be more alert to organise placements more robustly and notify managers quickly when carers may be struggling. The manager has less learning and messages to share with the whole carer group because the necessary analysis and thinking time is not taken. Nevertheless, children and young people continue to do well overall in their placements.

Staff, managers and panel members are well qualified, experienced and supervised. Morale is high because the agency is confident in its management

and is well staffed, resourced and financially viable. Staff receive regular and relevant training and appraisal that takes account of children and young people's views. Since the last inspection action has been taken to improve the quality of supervising and support staff. All those on the team now are highly committed and effective as well as able. The strengths and abilities of the staff group are key to the good progress and outcomes being achieved by children and young people.

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.