

# Fostering Solutions

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| <b>Registered manager</b>      | Julia Ann Robertson   |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Gareth Bonar Walton   |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 16/09/2010  |

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Fostering Solutions is an independent fostering agency and is part of an organisation with a number of registered branches. The agency operates from its main location in Elland and has offices in Gateshead and Beverley. The agency also has an office in Doncaster but no foster carers or young people are being supported from this office. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. It provides long and short term foster carers for children with a range of needs.

The agency's staff team comprises the registered manager with an operations manager, social workers and administrative staff at each office. The agency has a central team which undertakes all new foster carer assessments. At the time of the inspection the agency had approximately 160 approved fostering families and was supporting around 170 children and young people in foster care.

### 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**.

This is a good fostering service. It is well managed, is good at keeping young people safe and provides a quality of care which is good and excellent in some respects. This means that the agency and its carers help young people make outstanding progress and achieve excellent outcomes during their time in foster care.

Assessments are rigorous and thorough which ensures that carers are suitable and well equipped to look after young people. Ongoing support to foster carers is generally very good and the agency provides them with a very high standard of training. This means that carers are able to provide very good standards of care to young people and make very good relationships with them.

Safeguarding practice is effective in the agency. Young people feel safe and are able to make progress in their foster placements. Placements are well monitored by the agency. Appropriate risk assessments are in place and safe caring practices implemented. The agency works well with placing authorities to provide foster families that are well matched to the needs of young people who require a placement.

There are some specific elements of the agency's practice which are not as strong as they could be. The way it provides support to carers looking after young people with very specialist needs and provides them with access to relevant support groups could be improved. The provision of known information about young people to foster carers when they are placed is not always as good as the agency's usual standard. The agency does not, in every case, make sure that carers have fully committed to following the regulations, standards and agency's policies before young people are placed with them.

The agency has processes in place to monitor and quality assure its own practice and is working to make these areas more rigorous. Currently there are elements of the agency's recording which are not as good as they should be. For example, some documents are not fully completed and young people's progress reports do not reflect the progress and outcomes being achieved well enough. Additionally, some aspects of the agency's collection of data about young people's needs, achievements and their placement situations are not as effective as they should be. This limits the manager's ability to monitor and these matters and address any issues identified.

The agency is well managed with a leadership style which is dynamic and focused on improvement. The management, supervision and training of staff are good which means they are able to carry out their roles effectively. Staff, foster carers and young people are consulted and able to influence the development of the agency.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that, before any child is placed, each foster carer is informed in writing of, and accepts, all regulations and standards, policies and guidance agreed by the fostering service (NMS 21.9)
- consider how support that meets the needs of carers and access to support

groups can be better provided to carers of children and young people with very specialist needs (NMS 21)

- ensure the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively (NMS 15.2)
- improve data collection and monitoring to identify patterns and trends and enable action to be taken to address any matters raised (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that all records are clear, up to date and contribute to an understanding of the child's life. (NMS 26)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Young people fostered by the agency make outstanding progress during the time they live with the agency's foster carers.

Young people are given as much information as possible about their carers before they are placed, even in emergency situations. For example, one young person, removed from their family in an emergency was able to read the foster carers' profile in the car on the way to the carers. Careful introductions take place wherever possible. This helps young people to understand and influence what is happening to them. The agency's young person's guide is produced in different formats to make it accessible to children and young people of different ages.

Young people are matched carefully with well trained and supported carers who are fully assessed for their suitability. Consequently, levels of placement stability are good and young people make secure attachments to their foster carers. This means that young people are able to experience a positive family life.

Young people receive any medical help and support they need. They are registered with all primary health services and encouraged to partake in their annual medical checks. Young people are supported to access any specialist health provision they need. They take part in a wide range of activities, which increase their skills and self-confidence, and are encouraged to keep fit and healthy. Where young people have specific health needs, foster carers work effectively with a wide range of health professionals to ensure they are met. Consequently, young people's health improves significantly while in foster care. For example, one young child, subject to an 'end of life' plan on placement, has experienced such a significant improvement in health during their time in foster carers that an adoptive family is being sought.

Young people make excellent progress and achieve at a high level when compared to their starting points. They are provided with encouragement and support to attend school and achieve well. Consequently, school attendance levels are high. Attendance and achievement is monitored closely and the agency and its carers work with other agencies wherever necessary to address any issues or to provide additional support. For example, one young person, recently placed with foster

carers, was not attending school when placed. This young person is now attending education full time. The agency and foster carers continue to work very proactively with a local authority to ensure good support is provided to maintain and support this attendance further. The agency and its carers place great importance on young people's education. They are also ambitious for young people and this helps young people have their own ambitions. Most young people continue their education beyond school leaving age and a majority go on to college and higher education. For example, one young person recently had considerable success at GCSE level, gained a great deal of additional experience and success in a uniformed out of school organisation, is undertaking a college course and has clear plans for the future. The agency and its carers provide high levels of support young people to maintain their education despite significant difficulties they may be experiencing in other areas of their lives.

Young people are well cared for and fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers. Their lives are improved by the work of their foster carers and the range of activities that they undertake. Foster carers develop positive relationships with birth families and young people are supported to have contact with their families wherever this is appropriate and in line with their plan. Foster carers monitor contact arrangements to ensure they are beneficial for the young person and offer good practical and emotional support to them. Carers work hard to facilitate contact when arrangements are not straightforward and are committed to the value of contact for the young person. This means that contact is a positive experience for young people by enabling them to maintain important family ties.

Young people approaching adulthood receive very high levels of support which improves their lives considerably. Carers and the agency work hard to help young people develop the skills they will need for independence. For example, the agency and its carers ensure that young people save money on a weekly basis for when they leave care. The agency supports placements continuing under 'Staying Put' arrangements with over one-third of young people remaining with their foster carers beyond the age of 18.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency's foster carer recruitment process ensures it is able to assess and approve the right sort of carers for the young people who need families. People considering fostering are provided with detailed information about what they can expect at an early stage. This allows them and the agency to make an early decision whether fostering is for them. Rigorous screening at this stage helps to ensure the suitability of people making an application to be assessed to be foster carers.

The agency's work to assess and prepare prospective foster carers is thorough and careful. Suitability checks are rigorous and the preparation and training process is effective in considering applicants' competence, attitudes and motivation to foster children. The assessment process is timely and thorough. This means that carers

who complete the assessment process and are approved are able to provide high quality foster care to the young people placed with them.

The agency's fostering panel is correctly constituted with members with a suitable range of appropriate backgrounds and skills. Panel gives careful consideration of the cases presented to it and makes well-judged recommendations to the agency decision maker. The quality of assessments and accompanying information presented to panel is high and panel is confident in deferring a case if it is not able to make a recommendation. For example, the panel deferred one case as members did not feel that a key issue had been sufficiently well explored in the assessment report. This was addressed and re-presented to, and approved at a later panel.

Once panel has made its recommendation, decisions are made promptly and applicants are informed of the outcome in a timely manner. In a situation in which a placement was required at very short notice the agency placed children with carers on the basis of a verbal approval from the agency decision maker and followed this up with a formal approval the following day. However, the carers had not made their foster carers' agreement with the agency at that point. This meant that they had not undertaken to care for the young people in line with the regulations and the agency's procedures and had not fully agreed to fulfil their responsibilities. This had potential negative impact on the care provided to the young people.

The agency provides its foster carers with supervision and support that is generally of a high standard. Supervision and support visits are very frequent and well recorded. Supervision covers foster carers' own development as well as monitoring and guiding the care provided to, and outcomes being achieved by, the young people. Positively, these two aspects are recorded in separate ways to keep confidential information about the young person and carer on the relevant case file only. Agency workers maintain close involvement with young people in placement. They meet them regularly to ensure their needs are being met and they are able to express their views.

A number of foster carer support groups operate across the different regions covered by the agency and these are generally well appreciated. However, these groups do not always meet the needs of foster carers who are looking after children with very individual and specialist needs as often, the topics covered are not relevant to them. This means that these carers are not receiving the high level of support experienced by others.

Foster carers have development plans in place and a wide range of mandatory and optional training is provided to them. The agency provides an integrated approach to training which has been recently implemented. This provides a structure and framework which allows a planned training progression for carers from their initial preparation training through to specialist and higher education level training. The quality of training provided to carers is very good using specialist trainers and organisations to provide it. The great majority of the agency's carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care.

The agency works well with placing authorities to match young people and their foster carers in a careful and considered manner. They work hard to gain full information from the placing authority and to share this with foster carers, even in very short notice placements. Where information is not provided or is not of sufficient quality, the agency has a process for escalating matters with the placing authority to gain this information. These arrangements generally work well. This careful matching and very good ongoing support for placements mean that young people benefit from stable foster homes which meet their needs. In situations in which young people have to move carers on an unplanned and short notice basis, the process of information sharing is not always as effective as it could be. For example, in the case of one young person moved from one of the agency's carers as a result of an allegation made, the new carers had to wait some time for required information about the young person. In this situation the agency had taken the correct action to ensure the young person's safety but the lack of information could have had a negative impact on the young person concerned.

The agency and its carers maintain good communication with young people's social workers and keep them fully informed of young people's progress. Supervising social workers help ensure that foster carers are regarded as a full part of the team around the young person and their views are given appropriate weight in planning discussions. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and the agency ensures that carers are aware of these arrangements. This helps ensure that young people receive the care they require.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency works hard to make sure that foster carers receive comprehensive information about young people when they are placed. Risk assessments are developed and regularly reviewed and updated. Foster carers have household safe caring policies in place and individualised policies are developed for each young person placed. This means that care is provided to young people in a way that helps to keep them safe while allowing them to take age appropriate risks.

Supervising social workers visit young people in placement regularly and spend time alone with them in order to seek their views and ensure that they feel safe. Unannounced visits take place to foster carer's homes including a visit by a different worker than their usual supervising social worker. The agency's young people's guide informs young about how they can make a complaint or express any concerns they may have. Young people feel safe and well cared for in their foster homes. Foster carers are alert to the possibility of bullying and ensure that this is addressed. For example a foster carer took prompt action with a young person's school to address some bullying the young person was experiencing.

Young people do, on occasions, go missing from their foster placement, although this is not a frequent occurrence. Where the agency or its carers identify that there is an increased risk of a young person going missing this is proactively addressed. When

this does happen the agency responds appropriately and ensures that appropriate people are informed. The agency monitors reasons for young people going missing. The most frequent reason is for contact with family or friends. Incidents of going missing are explored with the young person and support provided as necessary. Where the agency considers that there are additional risks to a young person or considers them especially vulnerable, it ensures that risks are considered fully with the placing authority and any additional support provided.

The agency has good policies and procedures in place to ensure that young people are safeguarded. They keep copies of the various local authorities' safeguarding, child protection and missing from home and care procedures and protocols in the areas in which it operates. The agency provides its foster carers and staff with safeguarding and child protection training which is updated on a regular basis. The agency works closely with placing authorities and those in which young people live with their foster carers. Where safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur, including any allegations made against foster carers, the agency responds to these promptly, notifies the relevant agencies and cooperates with any action required to ensure that young people are safe.

Recruitment processes in the agency for foster carers, staff and panel members are rigorous. They thoroughly check on the background and suitability of applicants. This helps to ensure that those people who have contact with young people or sensitive information about their whereabouts are suitable to work with them. This helps keep young people safe.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has good working relationships with the regional commissioning bodies. It works well with placing authorities to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs and is in line with their local authority plan of care. The agency has a clear process for ensuring it and its carers have full information about the young person and for raising any issues about the young person's care. This helps to make sure that young people get the support and are able to access the services they need.

The agency works well with its foster carers to ensure that young people benefit from and are involved in the care delivered to them. Foster placements are well monitored and the work of carers is well supervised and reviewed. The agency monitors outcomes for children on an ongoing basis as well as annually. The annual monitoring gathers a great deal of information about the progress and experience of young people and the outcomes being achieved. The agency also uses its electronic recording system to monitor the work it does. However, the agency is not always able to retrieve the necessary information from this system, despite the information being known. For example, the agency found it difficult to access information about matters such as the reasons for unplanned endings, reasons for young people being missing from their foster home and the ethnicity of some young people and their

carer's. The agency were able to find this information in other ways but this means it is more difficult for the manager to access key information about the agency than it should be.

The agency is well managed at a strategic and operational level. Senior management within the organisation is dynamic and committed to improving the agency further. Monitoring of the agency's activities at a strategic level is effective. However, at an operational level some elements of the agency's recording and record keeping could be given closer oversight. For example, in some cases risk assessments are not always completed as fully as they should be, some records are not dated and the quality of some records are not always good enough. Additionally, children's progress reports are not always completed in such a way as to fully reflect significant events and progress being made by a young person. These documents have been recently introduced and excellent in concept. However, they are often not updated sufficiently well or clearly and, on occasion, do not record key matters in the young person's life.

Staffing levels are appropriate for the size of the agency. Social workers are well managed and supervised and have access to good training opportunities. Workloads are suitable to enable social workers to spend time getting to know the young people, seek their views and to ensure that suitable care is being provided to them. Good administrative arrangements are in place, which support the operation of the agency.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

## **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.