

# Focus on Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Sandra Jacobs-Walls/Christine Kennet
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	18/07/2011

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Focus on Fostering is an independent fostering agency. Fostering Solutions owns and manages the agency, a national independent fostering company. The fostering company is a part of the Acorn Care and Education Group. Fostering Solutions has a number of other registered branches. This office is in East London, having moved premises within the last 12 months.

The aim of the service is to provide high quality substitute family care for looked after children. The service currently offers a range of placements which include short term, long term, respite, emergency, bridging and parent and child placements. The fostering service undertakes the recruitment, preparation, assessment and support of foster carers.

At the time of the inspection, the fostering service has 45 approved foster caring households with 46 children in placement.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and children are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and children, 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 children's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and children not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

This fostering agency has improved its services to looked after children since the last inspection in July 2011. The service provides good quality of care and the outcomes for children are positive. Children, including those who have complex needs, receive personalised care that meets their needs, and they are kept safe.

The fostering service maintains successful and stable foster placements. Children, including several sibling groups, have their welfare safeguarded and promoted. Unplanned endings are rare. As a result, children thrive in secure placements, enjoying relationships that are nurturing and positive. The service pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity.

The recruitment of foster carers is not sufficiently effective and does not result in a good range of diverse foster care placements. This is not in line with the aims and objectives of the fostering service's statement of purpose. The preparation of potential foster carers is sound.

The fostering service largely produces comprehensive foster care assessments. There has been a noted improvement in the quality of assessment in recent years. Assessments are relevant, analytical, and evidence-based and completed within specified timescales.

Foster carers are valued members of the team and contribute well to the planning and decision-making in relation to children's care planning. There is strong partnership working between staff of the fostering team, foster carers, the placing authority and other involved professionals. The fostering service has in place clear strategic plans to better involve children, children and foster carers in the service's continual development.

Safeguarding practice is at the heart of this fostering agency. Effective systems ensure that children are kept safe. Thorough assessments of foster carers' skills, risk assessments and safer care plans are carried out consistently. These ensure the promotion of children's welfare and ensures their protection from harm and abuse.

The fostering service is well managed. Leaders and managers provide very effective leadership and have a clear vision and ambition for the service. There are strong quality assurance systems in place to ensure the service functions efficiently and that looked after children are cared for safely. The Registered Manager is very experienced and the staff team know the children very well. Leaders regularly and efficiently monitor the progress they are making. The staff team are very committed to ensuring the very best outcomes for the children in their care. Managers are very accessible and approachable to foster carers, staff and children alike. All those involved in the agency have high aspirations for future service development and its continued improvement.

Some shortfalls are noted. These relate to increasing the number and range of foster care placements, foster carers' completion of key training, and the quality of some case records and the revision of the service's statement of purpose.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Statutory Requirements**

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

<b>Reg.</b>	<b>Requirement</b>	<b>Due date</b>
<b>4 (2011)</b>	Keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose (Regulation 4(a))	<b>01/11/15</b>
<b>17 (2011)</b>	Provide foster carers with, and ensure they complete, such training, as appears necessary in the interest of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))	<b>01/11/15</b>

### **Recommendations**

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

- Ensure the fostering service recruits a range of foster carers to meet the needs of children they provide care for and is proactive in assessing current and future needs of children (NMS 13.1)
- Ensure that foster carers complete the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- Ensure staff keep key documents up to date. These include risk assessments, case file records and supervisory visits. (NMS 26)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children are cared for in accordance with written care plans. They feel well listened to and have opportunities to participate in placement decision-making. For example, they are encouraged to make choices with regards to contact arrangements, the recreational activities they participate in and whether or not to attend places of worship. They routinely attend looked after children's reviews and are supported by their foster carers and staff of the agency to fully participate. This helps to enhance their understanding of plans for their current and future care.

Children benefit from the service's careful placement negotiation. Where placements are planned, introductions between looked after children and their prospective foster carers are sensitively co-ordinated. This helps settle children into their new surroundings and supports a positive placement start. The fostering service distributes a 'welcome pack' and shares clear, age-appropriate information about the foster family selected to care for children. This further supports the smooth transition into placement.

Children feel safe and at ease with their foster carers. One child showed inspectors a card she had recently made for her foster carers. It read, 'You are the best family in the world. I love you'. Children develop strong attachments with their foster families and as a result, placements are secure, stable and they make good progress from their starting points. Unplanned endings occur infrequently and a fair proportion of children live in established, long-term foster care placements or are subject to Special Guardianship orders. They have a strong sense of belonging with their foster families, and foster carers equally are attached to the children they care for. One foster carer said of a child placed with her long-term, 'When I first saw B, I fell in love with her. I knew she would join us at some time.'

Children have good opportunities to share their views, wishes and opinions. The fostering service continues to develop strategies to further enhance the participation of looked after children in influencing the shape of the service. Children routinely take part in their statutory reviews and contribute to their foster carers' annual reviews. The service facilitates events and fun days for the purpose of gaining feedback from children to inform service development.

Children receive accessible information about making complaints and are aware of individuals and agencies they can approach if they have concerns. Complaints are received rarely. There has been only one complaint received in recent years from a looked after child, with the issue managed promptly and sensitively in accordance with the fostering service's complaints procedure. Children have good access to information about independent advocates; staff and foster carers are proactive in securing independent advocates for children if this is required.

Children's educational and learning outcomes are positive. Pre-school aged children regularly attend play facilities to support their general development. A foster carer says of the toddler with multiple disabilities she is caring for, 'Playgroups? She's been to them all. Many. It keeps her busy and occupied.' School aged children very regularly attend school, while older children are keenly engaged in further education and employment. Some achieve excellent exam results at both GCSE and A-level and some have progressed on to university. One is managing his own business as a result of the input and support of the fostering agency. Another was awarded 'best in show' for their photography work at the college they attend.

Managers of the service have systems in place to monitor children's educational attainment. Additional support is provided where remedial action is required, for example additional home tuition. Foster carers routinely attend personal educational planning meetings, school parents' evenings and other educational events. The fostering service organises celebratory events to acknowledge educational and other successes.

Children lead healthy lifestyles. They are registered promptly with general practices, opticians and dental services, have medical assessments completed annually and immunizations updated. They have good access to any required specialist services. For example, to address health issues such as sickle cell and enuresis. Similarly, children living with disability have very good access to specialist resources such as Great Ormond Street Hospital, consultant paediatricians and speech and language specialists. Children benefit from the fostering service's effective monitoring systems that highlight any known or emerging health care issues. A high proportion of children receive community based child and adolescent mental health services to assist their emotional and psychological development. Some also have access to direct work with the agency's psychologist to explore issues such as attachment, loss and trauma.

Children are encouraged to develop practical skills and emotional strategies to support them taking personal responsibility for their actions and behaviour. Foster carers understand and make appropriate use of both imposed boundaries and rewards to promote positive behaviour. A foster carer recalls managing challenging behaviour at the start of a placement: 'It was traumatic. There have been lots of bumps along the road, but we have managed.' It is clear that the resilience of foster carers and their absolute commitment to the children they care for has resulted in significant progress and hugely positive experiences for children.

Children have appropriate contact with their birth parents, brothers and sisters, other family members and friends when it is safe for them to do so. Staff ensure that arrangements for contact are carefully managed, with a consistent focus on the impact and the best interests of children.

To reach their potential, children are prepared for and supported into adulthood. Children engage with opportunities to learn independence skills and are supported in this by an information and assessment booklet. Many former looked after children remain in close contact with their foster families and continue to seek emotional support. The fostering agency makes effective and appropriate use of its 'Staying

Put' protocols. As a result, a sizeable number of children remain living with their foster families beyond 18 years of age.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering service provides good quality care and as a result children thrive in secure, stable placements. The recruitment of new foster carers has not been effective as although there are very high numbers of initial enquiries, these do not result in a significant increase in the number of newly approved foster carers. At the time of the inspection there are a number of foster carer assessments underway. The service has strategies in place to recruit more foster carers and offer a range of foster care placements to meet the diverse needs of looked after children. The service is yet to approve foster carers offering, for example, specialist placements as highlighted in the statement of purpose.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is good and very much focused on the needs of children. Foster carers receive good information and training to prepare them for their fostering role and they largely enjoy the process. A foster care comments, 'I really enjoyed talking about myself. We clicked, and the process was seamless; from assessment, to Skills to Foster, to placement.' Qualified and experienced independent assessors complete comprehensive and analytical assessments that identify the competencies and strengths foster carers have or need to develop. The assessment process is effectively quality assured by an assigned senior member of the organisation. This ensures the completion of robust assessments which are of a high quality.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and promotes safe and stable placements. Panel members reflect a diverse range of professional backgrounds. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work presented at panel meetings. There is strong communication between the panel chair and the manager. The organisation's head of panel is responsible for the monitoring and overview of the panel function, its development and the promotion of good practice across the organisation. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and there are occasional training opportunities for those on the fostering service's central list to support practice.

The support of foster carers is consistent, although some foster carers indicate that in the recent past, this has not always been the case. Foster carers comment that more recently support from the fostering service has been excellent. A foster carer comments, 'X is very approachable and supportive. She gives the best advice.' Another foster carer says of her supervising social worker, 'She's wonderful, really good. If you can't reach her, then S. She's brilliant!' Foster carers have access to a support group but some indicate they are more reliant on informal networks and links which they have developed over time.

Foster carers also have access to specialist support from within the organisation to promote their safe care with children who often have complex needs. Specialist staff include a psychologist, who offers consultation to foster carers, staff and some direct work with looked after children to explore placement issues and difficulties. The agency's behavioural specialist provides information, advice and practical support to foster carers who are working with children who present with challenging behaviour. This work typically focuses on conflict resolution and, on occasion, physical intervention strategies. Such specialist support promotes placement stability and success.

Staff's supervision of foster carers is good and their communication with foster carers is frequent and meaningful. Staff make themselves available to support foster carers emotionally and practically. A foster carer comments, 'N visits once a month. Supervision is helpful. She's very good. When there are problems, she speaks with managers. N has turned things around. We are enjoying ourselves.' The agency has an effective out-of-hours service, staffed by managers. This service is very effective. A foster carer comments, 'At one point, I was constantly working with out of hours. When I called, she didn't let me go – we were on the phone for hours. I really needed that.' Staff generally maintain good records of formal supervisory visits which are consistent in their focus on placement progress and issues. However, these records are not always updated.

Children and foster carers benefit from an extensive training programme. A training consultant was recruited to develop and implement a programme of training that meets well the needs of foster carers in order to provide safe and nurturing placements. The training programme is wide ranging in scope and is highly relevant to the role of the foster carer. Training is structured in tiers and identifies essential training, 'extra' and 'expert' training. The training programme is a feature of the agency's strategic plans to equip foster carers with skills and knowledge to enhance the quality and success of placements.

The previous inspection highlighted training as an area for improvement. It is clear that there has been much progress in the development of training. However, as identified previously, a small number of foster carers do not complete the required Training, Support and Development Standards within a 12-month period. Some other foster carers are yet to complete essential training. This is not in the best interests of children.

Foster carers views of the quality of training offered is variable. Some indicate that training is useful, while others feel it does not fully meet their needs. One foster carer comments, 'There's no new challenge for experienced foster carers, it's repetitive. There's little progression for experienced carers.' Managers of the fostering service acknowledge that this has been the case in the past, but that as the newly developed training programme is fully implemented, foster carers will benefit from more challenging training opportunities.

Children are carefully matched to their foster placements to ensure that individual needs are clearly identified and met. There is a formal process, supported by dedicated referral officers to ensure appropriate matching. This process is robust and includes the recording of comprehensive background information to promote stable,

successful placements. Foster carers are very much involved in this process. Children's care plans are well adhered to by all parties and statutory reviews are convened at appropriate intervals. This assists in exploring placement issues, promotes permanency and helps to minimise unnecessary placement drift.

Foster carers understand explicitly the importance of working in partnership with the fostering service and other professionals. This ethos is promoted in agency literature and training. Foster carers confirm and case files evidence the effective partnership working between staff, foster carers and other involved professionals such as the child's social worker, health and educational experts. This is important to ensure that all professionals are appropriately informed of placement progress and participate in decision-making about children's lives.

The fostering service encourages and welcomes feedback from external professionals. Local authority social workers are routinely invited to make comments about foster carers' performance and competencies through the annual reviewing process. Feedback is generally positive. One child's social worker comments on a review feedback form, 'I would like to let you know that X are amongst the best foster carers I have met. They are committed to the children as are members of their family. They appear to have a good understanding of the children's needs and are willing to do their best as foster carers.'

## **Safeguarding children and children**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering service staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children is paramount. The service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of the children with whom they are working and are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours they can exhibit. The fostering service's protection of children is robust at all levels. This is a clear strength of the service.

Children benefit from the fostering service's clear and comprehensive child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Children receive clear information about making complaints and have good opportunities to speak with staff of the service in private. Staff aim to complete at least two unannounced visits to foster carers' homes to further promote the safety of placements.

Foster carers receive good written guidance and excellent training to assist them to keep children safe from harm and abuse. Managers of the fostering service monitor and have good overview and insight into all safeguarding occurrences. They take effective action to promote the protection of children. The organisation's internal safeguarding board vigorously monitors, evaluates and reports on all aspects of the organisation's safeguarding duties. This forum has influence on policy development and practice that promotes the safe care of looked after children.

The fostering service is proactive in ensuring there is effective partnership working with regard to child protection enquiries. There is purposeful and consistent liaison

with involved professionals such as the placing authority and the police. Staff attend and make valuable contributions to professional and strategy meetings that explore child protection issues. Where there are standard of care issues, incidents of a child protection nature or allegations made, the service effectively and consistently acts in accordance with agreed safeguarding protocols to ensure children's safety remains the primary objective.

Staff ensure that children's safety and well-being is regularly reviewed and monitored. Comprehensive placement plans ensure that changing needs are identified and strategies are put in place to address them. Some risk assessments and individual safe-caring policies require updating. This is to ensure that changing needs and or emerging risky behaviour is fully explored and minimised.

Children do not regularly go missing and the frequency of children being involved in sexual exploitation is rare. Any incidents are managed effectively and promote the safety of children. Foster carers are familiar with relevant safeguarding policies and protocols. A foster carer comments, 'We were told to call the police and stay in the house when she ran off. But we couldn't just do that, so I went to search for her.'

The fostering service has sound systems in place for the safe vetting and recruitment of staff and others working on behalf of the service. These are well-organised and comprehensive. The organisation ensures that appropriate checks are carried out which confirm that staff and members of the central list are suitable to work with children.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders of the service are ambitious for change and many aspects of the fostering service's leadership and management are strong. The service has an ambitious, strategic plan in place to improve practice further and set the future direction and expansion of the fostering service. However, the continued development of the fostering service is hampered due to the pace of change in the management and organisational structure. Further organisational restructuring is underway. These frequent changes have contributed to slow progress in implementing established strategic plans. This is noticeably the case for foster carer and staff recruitment and training initiatives.

Despite this, the fostering service is well run. The Registered Manager is highly skilled, well qualified and experienced to manage the service efficiently and with positive effect. Stakeholders both within and external to the fostering service overwhelmingly identify the Registered Manager's skill, compassion and advocacy for looked after children as being exceptional. This is the view of staff and foster carers. One foster carer says of the Registered Manager, 'With (the Registered Manager) its 100% better. It's improved a great deal, she has turned it around. I wouldn't be here otherwise.'

Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing good support to children and their foster families. They are well supported through effective and consistent training, supervision, appraisal and reflective practice.

The fostering service has extensive, effective monitoring systems in place for most aspects of the service's operation. These include, for example, the tracking of individual children's progress and outcomes, the review and revision of key policies and procedures and the review and evaluation of child protection issues. Managers appropriately notify Ofsted and others of key events as specified in the regulations. Managers complete quarterly overview reports to the organisation's senior managers and consistently produce quality of care reports as required by the regulations. As a consequence, leaders have good insight into the quality of the fostering service, including areas for improvement. The fostering service is financially sound and is appropriately staffed and resourced.

The statement of purpose is a detailed, comprehensive document that outlines the aims and objectives of the fostering organisation, Fostering Solutions. The document is not sufficiently explicit in highlighting information more specific to Focus on Fostering. For example, the statement of purpose does not accurately reflect the types of placements currently provided by this fostering service. This is important so that placing authorities are clear about whether or not the fostering service can offer the kind of placement required at the point of referral. The two children's guides are well written, creative summaries of services provided. These are informative and accessible to children.

The fostering service maintains good records. There are minor weaknesses in some staff documentation. In particular, the recording of some supervisory visits, risk assessments and individual safe caring policies are not consistently updated and so do not always reflect the current situation.

The previous inspection resulted in one requirement and four recommendations. The service has failed to resolve one recommendation that foster carers attain Training, Support and Development Standards within 12-months of their approval. This recommendation is repeated.

The fostering agency is well organised, has realistic plans and a clear vision for its future development. The service demonstrates a commitment to improvement and to delivering positive outcomes for children.

## **About this inspection**

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and children, 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. inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.