
24 Seven Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Miss Seka Graovac
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Registered manager
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Date of last inspection 30/04/2014

Service information

Brief description of the service

The agency is privately owned. It aims to provide a wide variety of fostering placements, including emergency placements, in London and surrounding counties. It has 42 approved fostering households, comprising 64 individual carers with an overall capacity of 103 placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency provided foster care to 47 children, 16 of whom lived with their siblings. In the last 12 months, the agency approved 10 new households.

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**

Leaders, managers and staff are effective at enriching children's lives and promoting positive outcomes. They operate a safe fostering service. They fulfil the agency's statement of purpose by recruiting foster carers with right attitudes and a wide range of parenting skills. A strong fostering panel contributes to the robustness of the foster carers' approval process and the high quality of the service.

Foster carers receive good support, supervision and training. They work in effective partnership with the children's social workers and professionals from other services, such as health and education, to provide consistent care and support to children. They advocate well for children and make valuable contributions to the effective care planning and delivery of care to children.

Foster carers provide children with a positive, safe, stable and nurturing family environment. They have the right skills to meet children's diverse and complex needs and to promote their welfare. Good risk management and trusting relationships between the foster carers and children underpin the agency's effectiveness at keeping children safe.

Children highly appreciate their foster families. They report feeling supported and safe. They know that their views and feelings count. They have developed a deep sense of security, safety and belonging. They feel able to talk with their carers about any concerns that they might have. They have positive experiences and enjoy good family lives. They have excellent opportunities to develop their interests and knowledge. They achieve good progress across different aspects of their lives. Many children have attained better educational attainment than predicted.

Leaders and managers are highly visible. They have built positive relationships with the placing authorities and partner agencies. The agency is appropriately resourced and managed. The manager, who has been acting in the last three months, has applied to register with Ofsted. The lack of a registered manager has not had a negative impact on safeguarding children's welfare and promoting their positive outcomes.

The agency is run in accordance with legislation and good practice guidance. Leaders and managers track children's progress and celebrate their achievements. They monitor various aspects of the service and have a plan in place for further development. They have a demonstrable commitment to continue to give children and foster carers the opportunities to meaningfully contribute to this development.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

Strengthen the leadership's oversight by making the monitoring processes more analytical, evaluative and integrated. (National minimum standards 25.1)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children experience good care and positive relationships, from the beginning to the end of the placement. They enjoy having good family lives and make good progress across different aspects of their own lives.

Staff facilitate smooth preparation for the placement by providing comprehensive information to the placing authority. This includes having foster carers' profiles in a child-friendly format. Staff and foster carers continue to work in effective partnership with other professionals to ensure that children experience consistent, individualised and effective care. This reassures children that adults are working together to support them.

Children are warmly welcomed into their foster families. The majority of them settle quickly and enjoy the stability of good family life. A young person said that although she had only been with the foster family for a month, she trusted them.

Foster children live with their brothers and sisters, whenever this is in their best interest. A local authority placement officer commented that having foster carers who can offer a home to siblings is one of the agency's particular strengths. When children do not live together with their brothers and sisters, foster carers support them to maintain meaningful and safe contact with the members of their birth families.

Foster carers show healthy respect towards children's past experiences and their family ties. While helping children to discern right and wrong, they teach children to think positively about themselves and others. They contribute effectively to life-story work and the development of the child's identity and individuality.

Children develop close relationships with all foster family members. They talk lovingly about their foster carers and their 'new' brothers and sisters. A young person described a foster carer's daughter: 'She is terribly sweet. I love her. She is like my little sister.'

Children talk joyfully about having normal lives. A young person summed up her experience of being fostered: 'I have somebody who cares about me.' Children are fully included in all aspects of family life. They live in an environment that is physically and emotionally comfortable, safe and secure. They enjoy having good-quality food and leading active lives. They receive regular health checks and have access to specialist services, when they need them. They receive good health advice, information and therapeutic interventions.

fire education), while working alongside the fire brigade. Another young person has developed a passion for reading books and skateboarding.

Children go on day trips and holidays with their foster families. A young person said: 'We go places that I have never been to.' Another young person talked with excitement about a day trip to a seaside resort. This was the first time that she saw the sea. A young person who just returned after a week on a horse-riding holiday talked about how much she enjoyed it. The agency also organises many events for children, such as visiting museums, activity centres, funfairs and parks. Children share having a good time with adults and other children. They gain confidence and social skills. Their behaviour improves over time and is usually of a good standard.

Children regularly attend schools and other educational provision. They make good progress in their learning. They have good educational attainments. Many children have done better than expected. Some young people are preparing to go to university to study a subject of their choice.

Children have good opportunities to develop independent living skills. The agency organised a visit to an education and careers fair that provided advice on writing a curriculum vitae (CV) and finding work, apprenticeships and traineeships. Some placements have continued through 'staying put arrangements', after the young people reached adulthood. Some foster carers and children have created lasting bonds.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The service is child centred and characterised by a strong anti-discriminatory agenda. The agency fulfils its statement of purpose by recruiting foster carers from different backgrounds, with right attitudes and a wide range of good parenting skills. The preparation, assessment, support and training of carers focus on identifying and developing the skills that carers need in order to meet children's diverse and complex needs. Some carers have developed specialist skills and are able to offer successful placements to children with profoundly complex needs. An example of this is a foster family that specialises in providing care for children who have Downs Syndrome.

A strong fostering panel discharges its gatekeeping and quality assurance functions well. It contributes to the effective decision-making that has children's best interests at its centre.

Foster carers have good training opportunities that include face-to-face and online training on a wide range of subjects. They achieve the training, support and development standards in foster care within one year of approval. They have an in-depth understanding of children who are looked after. Carers are sensitive to children's needs. They understand how these needs link with the children's past experiences. They are able to provide children with a safe, nurturing and supportive family environment that facilitates children's development and positive outcomes. Foster carers are particularly good at opening up new opportunities for children. They instil children with confidence

and courage to aim high in life. They effectively enable children to make positive choices and follow their ambitions.

Foster carers receive good support from the agency and highly value this. Monthly supervising social workers' meetings and smooth communication underpin the supportive relationships within the agency. In turn, the quality of these relationships enables the foster carers to provide high-quality individualised care. Foster carers say that the agency is always there for them, when they need it. The out-of-hours management arrangements are effective.

The agency is mindful to provide good support to all family members. Birth children are meaningfully included in all aspects of the assessment, support and review processes. The agency's invitations to special events always include birth children. The agency is effective at facilitating good family lives. Foster carers enable children to maintain and develop positive and safe relationships with their birth families, as much as possible.

Foster carers have good understanding of their roles and the roles of other professionals involved in children's lives. They make proactive and effective contributions to the team around the child. They appropriately use any delegated authority that the corporate parent has given them to make decisions in the child's best interests. They are effective advocates for children. They successfully contribute to the reviews of the children's care plans.

Professionals highly value the carers' input and recognise their part in positively influencing children's experiences, progress and outcomes. A social worker wrote to the agency: 'It is quite refreshing to work with a carer who takes full responsibility for organising and attending health, education and home office appointments for a young person, and then provides feedback and any action points following the meeting. As a result there is a very strong support network in place for this young person.' Another social worker said that the foster carer managed to enrol a young person into a particular college when all his efforts failed. He said: 'I really don't know how she managed to do that.'

Careful matching, good support mechanisms for foster carers and effective partnership working with the social workers, schools and health services contribute to the stability of placements. A social worker wrote to the agency at the end of a successful placement: 'The carers did an amazing job. I don't think that we could have found a better match.' A commissioning officer gave an example of the agency's strong commitment to the stability of placements: the agency went out of its way to accommodate complex arrangements for education and contact, when the placing authority was unable to help.

The agency's children's participation worker makes a strong contribution to the stability of the placements and the strength of the child's voice within the agency. He attends disruption meetings and uses creative ways to secure children's engagement and progress.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency operates a safe fostering service. Safeguarding children and promoting their welfare are the agency's priorities across its different levels of functioning.

Children report feeling safe. They have developed a deep sense of security and safety. They feel able to talk with their carers about any concerns that they might have. Close and trusting relationships between the foster carers and children underpin the agency's effectiveness at keeping children safe.

The procedures for vetting staff, panel members and foster carers are thorough and assure suitability of people for their roles. The fostering panel's scrutiny of the assessments and checks of prospective carers contributes to the rigour of the approval process for foster carers.

Supervision of foster carers, support and training have a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. The training that is currently on offer includes sessions on various aspects of safeguarding, such as internet safety, child sexual exploitation, self-harming and countering radicalisation.

Supervising social workers regularly review the foster carers' practice to make sure that it is the safest possible. Written risk assessments include clear strategies that promote children's safety and enable children to develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. Each child has a 'missing' profile and an assessment of the risk of sexual exploitation. Those assessments take into account the impact of any past neglect or abuse on the child's needs and vulnerabilities. The effectiveness of the safeguarding strategies is carefully monitored, reviewed and evaluated. Foster carers confidently follow appropriate procedures that facilitate effective reporting mechanisms and multi-agency involvement. The levels of the episodes of children going missing from the care of this agency are low.

Foster carers talk with children about their safety and encourage them to adopt safer behaviours. They understand where children are coming from and what makes them vulnerable to risks. Foster carers hold firm and consistent boundaries, while providing authentic, emotionally warm support, and give protective advice. They have an open attitude to children's experiences and disclosures. They are able to safely contain children's anxieties and worries.

Supervising social workers promote safe care by making unannounced visits and carrying out regular health and safety assessments of the physical environment. They see children in private to give them the opportunities to share their views, uninfluenced by others. Children have good opportunities to raise any concerns or complaints with the agency, if they wish to do so.

The agency has organised workshops for children, to raise their safety awareness and help them to stay safe. For example, the workshop for young people on hygiene included information on sexually transmitted diseases and safe relationships.

The agency works closely with other services, such as the police, children's social and health services and schools, to safeguard children and promote their welfare. The foster carers and staff are prepared to challenge other professionals when it is in the best interest of the child. An example of this is asking the placing authority to review their child sexual exploitation risk assessment in relation to a particular young person. This has led to the young person receiving a more specialist input to safeguard her from the risks of sexual exploitation. They have also asked another placing authority to take more into account the young person's anxiety and the risk of forced marriage, should she be reunited with her birth family. The agency has contributed to a serious case review in a case in which the placing authority reintegrated a child with the father, despite the agency's repeatedly expressed concerns about this arrangement. The move has had tragic consequences.

The agency follows good practice in relation to allegations against foster carers. The managers and staff work in close collaboration with the placing and host authorities to take protective and child-focused actions. They also provide good support to the foster families at the time of the investigation, either directly or through an independent organisation, as far as is possible under the circumstances. A foster family that was recently a subject of an investigation of historical abuse said that the agency's support was absolutely amazing. Another carer who returned to the agency via the independent reviewing panel's recommendation said that the support she received from the agency was really good and that everybody was very professional.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders and managers demonstrate having a clear and ambitious vision for the service and children in their care. This vision is shared across the agency. The welfare of children is always put first and the professional standards are high.

Leaders, managers and staff are committed to learning and to the continuous improvement of the service. They have developed a written strategy to work towards demonstrably and consistently achieving delivery of an outstanding service. However, multiple changes in the management have slowed down the journey towards this aim. The registered manager left in April 2016. A senior supervising social worker, who was in the acting position, has recently been appointed as a manager. She has applied to register with Ofsted and is undergoing the registration process.

The agency is well staffed and resourced to fulfil its statement of purpose. Staff receive regular monthly supervision and have annual reviews of their performance. They have access to training opportunities that enable them to continue to update their knowledge

and to be effective in their roles.

Leaders, managers and staff have developed effective working relationships with placing authorities, social workers and other professionals who work with children and families. They have a

Leaders and managers have addressed the requirement and recommendation from the previous inspection. They have strengthened the fostering panel and agreed an individual development plan with all fostering households. As the directors also own another independent fostering agency, they have proactively used what they learned from the inspection of that service to improve the practice in this agency.

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.