

# Vitality Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Christy Wannop
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<b>Registered manager</b>	Lorna Sackey-Clarke
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Godfrey Sackey-Clarke
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	19/12/2007

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Vitality Fostering is a privately-owned, independent fostering agency which operates from an office in Luton, Bedfordshire. The fostering service provides short and long-term and mother-and-baby fostering placements. This small agency has six foster families altogether. There are currently 7 children living in 5 foster homes, offering 10 places, or 15 if siblings share.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

Outcomes for children and young people are good. They have a safe home life with caring, well-trained and supported foster carers who respect and meet their diverse needs. The fostering service provides an adequate quality of care and works to individual plans for each child. The quality of care promotes improved outcomes for children and young people. Unplanned placement changes are minimised as far as possible. Siblings stay together because foster carers are flexible and have maintained commitment to keeping children in placement through difficult times.

All children and young people have positive views about the quality of their foster placements and feel comfortable and cared for. Foster carers appreciate the benefits of the size of the agency, saying it is a 'small agency, like a family.' Placing authorities are wholly positive about their experience of the agency and about the improved experience and life chances for their children.

Foster carers' assessments cover all required areas and the panel ensures that no one who is not suitable becomes a foster carer. However, assessments are not of a consistently good standard. There are shortfalls in the agency's safer recruitment procedures and evidence of decision making after the panel meeting is flawed. While outcomes for children are good, there are significant regulatory and national minimum standard breaches.

Leadership and management is unsatisfactory. A lack of effective governance and

chronically poor record keeping has the potential to deliver an unsafe service. This has not had an impact on children but has the potential to do so without the systematic safeguards of an effectively established and monitored service.

## 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>
20 (2011)	ensure that persons employed to work for the purposes of the fostering service are fit to do so and there is full and satisfactory information in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1; for example, that written records evidence consistent good practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance (Regulation 20)	21/01/2013
22 (2011)	maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedule 2 (Regulation 22)	31/01/2013
24 (2011)	make a written record of its (panel) proceedings and the reasons for its recommendation. Specifically, that there is an approved, clear and accurate final copy of panel minutes (Regulation 24(2))	31/01/2013
27 (2011)	ensure that a foster care agreement includes the terms of the foster parent's approval Regulation 27(5)(b) Schedule 5 (1)(a)	31/01/2013
28 (2011)	give written notice to the foster parent that they propose to terminate, or revise the foster parent's approval (a "qualifying determination") together with their reasons and a copy of any recommendation made by the fostering panel (Regulation 28(7))	31/01/2013
30 (2011)	maintain a case record for each foster parent that includes the information specified in paragraph 1, 2 & 3 (Regulation 30 (1)(2)(3))	31/01/2013
31 (2011)	maintain a register (a "register of foster parents") and enter into it the following particulars in relation to each foster parent - name, address, date of birth and sex of each foster parent, the date of approval and of each review of approval and the current terms of approval (Regulation 31)	31/01/2013
35 (2011)	maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and improving the quality of foster care provided by the agency (Regulation 35(1)(a)(b))	31/01/2013
36 (2011)	notify without delay the persons or bodies in column 2 of the table if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 take place. (Regulation 36 (1))	21/01/2013

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that, except where there are particular identified factors which dictate to the contrary, foster carers should be given delegated authority to make day-to-day decisions regarding health, leisure and education (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 3.10)
- ensure that reports on the suitability of foster carers are accurate, up-to-date, are countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that panel members sign an acceptance form to record their agreement to performance objectives, participation in induction and training, and safeguarding the confidentiality of records and information submitted to the panel (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 5.14)
- ensure that the agency decision maker takes account of the Hofsetter principle and lists the material taken into account in reaching the decision (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 5.40)
- suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match only if the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. For example, that households have sufficient bedroom space and matching takes account of approval category (NMS 15.1)
- ensure that children, their parents, foster carers, staff and the placing authority are clear about the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the services and facilities it provides. Specifically, that the Statement of Purpose clearly describes the range of placements that foster carers can support and the range of staff working for the agency (NMS 16)
- ensure that the fostering service's safeguarding procedure is in line with Government guidance and requirements, including the duty to refer information to statutory bodies and that it is known to fostering service staff (NMS 22.2)
- submit the child protection procedures for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children Board and that they are consistent with the procedures relevant to the geographical area where the foster carer lives (NMS 22.4)
- ensure that all the staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and NMS and with the service's policies and procedures; specifically, that there is effective monitoring and management (NMS 25.3)
- ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are signed and dated. This with particular reference to maintaining robust paper and electronic records that establish the author, date of creation and any subsequent edit and who has made the update. (NMS 26.5)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children and young people get on very well with foster carers who respect their differences, culture and history. They have good support to practice their faith, eat familiar food and make links in the local community. Children of mixed heritage are especially likely to find a home that can celebrate and reflect, if not their exact background, then their religion, or, for young asylum seekers, their experience of coming to Britain from a different country. Some young people widen their horizons because of placements with carers who do not share their ethnic, religious or cultural background. They learn about and share with family and friends their new knowledge about the culture and celebrations of foster carers.

Children and young people's views are valued by the agency and foster carers, who are sensitive to their experiences. They have a say about their care to their foster carers and to fostering social workers. If they cannot speak up for themselves, foster carers advocate on their behalf. They are part of the fostering family and stay in fostering households that are good, safe environments. A placing social worker described how one child fitted in with the fostering family, how he gets on well with foster family children and is completely involved in their family life.

Children and young people receive good health care and take responsibility for making healthy choices, about smoking, sexual health, exercise and leisure pursuits. Children who have not had regular dental treatment get this. Those without recommended immunisations, catch up with this health protection. They have supportive homes from where they go to therapy to overcome trauma in their lives. Children learn to feel better about themselves and their personal hygiene improves; their appearance and self-esteem gets better.

Children and young people's experience of education improves, sometimes dramatically. They feel better about their academic abilities and take opportunities they may not have tried before. For example, one young person is doing extra sessions at school because they now see the benefit of getting a good education. Children go on school trips. Attendance improves to 100% and children who need extra tuition get the time they need to catch up. Placing authorities say that young people are making good progress at school. Some young people try work experience; all save money. They think about their futures positively, particularly as they get ready for the next stage in their independent lives.

Relationships with foster carers are good. Children and young people learn to keep in touch with their foster carers when they are out in the neighbourhood and this helps to keep them safe and adhere to agreed boundaries. Children and young people get support from their carers to make strong and positive relationships with peers through constructive, enjoyable leisure activities. A placing social worker described how foster carers have improved the quality of life for children; she 'has advocated tirelessly for (children) to engage in horse riding, swimming.' Foster carers put in routines and boundaries that benefit the children; they take them on holidays and

expand their horizons.

Several young people recognise that their previous behaviour was risky. They now come home on time, take taxis and stay away from trouble. They keep in touch with family and friends and get the help they need to make sure these relationships are positive and safe. Brothers and sisters stay together and some emergency placements of siblings have continued long after the expectations of the placing authority, because foster carers have been so committed to the children. One child described how nice it was to be part of a family; they loved living with their carer, liked going out on trips, holiday, activities and having a 'nice little hug before bedtime'.

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

This small agency has sufficient carers with enough places to offer care to children if needed. The agency would like to expand. It has a speciality in providing placements for children of black, mixed heritage and ethnic minority backgrounds and current foster carers reflect this. However, they do place children of white British backgrounds successfully. When carers and children do not share a religion, foster carers positively promote children's continuing religious practice, according to parental wishes in children's best interests. Because it is such a small agency, staff know foster carers' skills, specialisms and preferences and so can suggest a match based on personal knowledge. On occasion, it is not clear that the needs of existing children within the household have been considered when matching children to a foster family, or where everyone will sleep when bedroom space is limited. However, placements last and foster carers do not give up on children. Placing authorities often request foster carers by name, for children who need placements. This is because they have good experiences of the quality of foster care, particularly for mother and baby placements and for challenging teenagers.

Foster carers are committed, resourceful and energetic in meeting the needs of their foster children. One foster carer said, 'Fostering is my passion.' Foster carers are very positive about their preparation, training, support, and supervision. However, foster carer assessments by untrained staff have been of variable quality; for example, information is missing and no evidence of quality assurance by a manager within the organisation. There is evidence of improving quality recently. Reviews take place within timescales.

The fostering panel meets only one or two times a year, but is properly constituted, reflects the diverse community and is led by an experienced freelance panel chair. However, members have not signed an appropriate agreement about their role and responsibilities. The fostering panel fulfils a valuable gatekeeping function, both of the quality of reports and about the suitability of people to become foster carers. They give advice and would like to do more, but meet only infrequently.

There are, however, poor records of recommendations and decision-making

processes after applicants have been to panel. Minutes of the panel are unreliable and there is not a robust electronic system to ensure that the panel chair approves an accurate record. For example, minutes and other records of the same meeting give different accounts of decisions and attendees. The responsible individual is also the agency decision maker. He has made decisions to approve foster carers before the recommendations of the panel have been confirmed in the final minutes. When making decisions and notifying foster carers, he does not take account of statutory guidance in detailing full consideration and the approach taken to reaching the decision. The agency does not make the terms of approval clear in panel recommendations; for example, numbers of children and preferred age range. These matters are also not specified in the decision maker's letter or the foster carer agreement. Where terms of approval change, or are to be amended, the agency decision maker does not currently issue a determination before making a decision.

Foster carers say they have good information about children before they are placed, and vice versa. The agency provides care and placement planning documentation, but this does not always make clear that the parent or placing authority has devolved consent for foster carers to make decisions about children's everyday lives. This means that children may experience delay while they seek formal consent for things such as medical treatment and school trips.

Foster carers talk with insight about the lives of children before they came to live with them; they understand about trauma, separation and loss. They talk to children about their pasts and implement plans made by placing authorities. They communicate well and agree a form of words with placing authorities that children can understand, for example, 'You will go home when it is safe.'

All foster carers have training in managing challenging behaviour positively. A foster carer said, 'There has been lots of improvement in his behaviour. He returns home on time when he goes out with friends.' Other foster carers have diffused the tension and reduced the risk when young people act out challenging behaviour. They talk them into feeling calm and give them space to quieten down.

Support for foster carers is good. Foster carers are confident that when they need help they get it, describing responsive support around the clock. 'One foster carer said, 'I have felt valued and appreciated by my social worker over the last six months. Although we do not always see eye to eye, I feel she understands what I am up against and that has made a great difference for me and my family.' A high proportion of foster carers have achieved the government's recommended qualification for foster carers. A foster carer described the value of her training, 'I can see how it is going to help me to be a foster parent and that child to grow within the system.'

Foster carers work cooperatively with placing authorities as part of a team and resolve any communication difficulties amicably. Placing authorities value their input and ideas about how to make children safer. They are especially pleased with improvements in relationships with birth families and in education. Children are extremely positive about their foster carers. One said, 'I really love it here, really

lovely place to live, enjoy going to places, having family gatherings and just being here really, nothing negative.'

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

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The agency plans for and works to reduce unnecessary risks for children and young people, through safer care plans, risk assessments and training for staff and foster carers. Fostering social workers have an active focus on vulnerability to bullying at school and negative influences in the community in their regular discussions with foster carers and children themselves. The agency makes sure children and young people have good quality information in their guide to fostering about other forms of independent support and advice and advocacy services. Children say they are safe and know how to complain.

Policy and procedures support good work with the police to minimise the risk to young people who have gone missing or routinely fail to return on time. Fostering social workers have visited at the weekend and have spent all day with a child who was threatening to run away. A placing social worker described the agency as 'brilliant' at keeping one young person safe when having contact, by being resourceful in finding solutions to risky travel plans. This is a positive approach to promoting children's safety.

There have been no allegations or disclosures of child abuse. Foster carers are confident in reporting and clear of the benefit of their training in safe care on their daily fostering experience. Staff and carers are trained in the agency's policy and procedure for child protection, but the Registered Manager has not asked for comment by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Not all social work staff are clear about routes of referral if there are concerns about adults working with children, and the agency does not have copies of the procedures for the geographical area in which foster carers live. This has the potential for confusion in the event of an incident.

The agency is not able to evidence a safer recruitment procedure that meets the regulatory requirements for all adults working for the agency. For example, staff have been employed before references are received. While everyone has a Criminal Records Bureau check, references are not always verified, and there is not evidently a full employment history at the point of employment. Files are very badly organised. This lack of clarity in processes and records for deciding which adults are suitable to work with children does not protect them.

### **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **inadequate**.

There is much strength in this small agency, but there are also significant regulatory

shortfalls and a failure to comply with essential regulations for the establishment of a fostering agency. These have not had an impact on outcomes for children, but their continuing good progress is jeopardised by a chaotic framework of managerial operations.

This is a small agency operated by a husband, as responsible individual, and wife, as Registered Manager; both are 'hands on.' A placing authority describes them as very sensitive and says they relate well to carers and children and 'keep track' of them. They describe the owners' real commitment to the agency and are especially pleased with how foster carers respect children's backgrounds, religious and cultural heritages.

Children and young people have good information about what they can expect in foster care. The agency has a very full Statement of Purpose; however, this describes a more full staffing complement than is currently in place. It also describes a very wide range of placements; however, foster carers do not currently have the skills and experience to provide placements for children with special needs or children on remand placements.

The provider completes an annual review report about the quality of care and sends this to Ofsted, and they consider the views of children and staff in that process. However, there is no effective formal system for monitoring and controlling the required records and activities of the service. Consequently, they have not been able to ensure that all work is consistent with the regulations and national minimum standards, or identify patterns or trends.

A significant number of legally-required records are missing, not maintained with the required detail or are unreliable, because they cannot be verified as the original document. Records are dispersed between different shared (computer) drives and paper files. There is no foster carer register that shows foster carers who have applied, or been approved, or terminated since registration. There is no children's register that gives the detail required by regulation and to which the agency can reliably and efficiently refer. There is no complete record in respect of each person working for the fostering service. There is no central record of accidents. Notifications of significant events, such as hospital treatment, are not made to Ofsted. Minutes of fostering panel meetings are unreliable. Electronic records are not signed or dated and the provider cannot demonstrate the date of creation, the author, whether a record has been updated, or overwritten and by whom. Foster carers' records are not clear and are dispersed between partial electronic records and paper files; records sometimes contain two versions of the same document, with different dates and content. There is no single case record for foster carers. Foster carers' records do not contain a record of each placement of a child with them.

Chaotic record keeping makes monitoring and finding the correct information about children and their carers difficult. The agency is transferring records from paper files to electronic format and the Registered Manager cannot use the electronic system. The owners rely on informal communication and memory to form their view of how well the agency is doing. They do work as a team, however. The skills and

commitment of the foster carers and all staff have resulted in good outcomes for children. There have been no placement breakdowns or complaints. The Registered Manager says this is because they focus on what is important, the children.

The agency is sufficiently staffed for the small number of foster carers. They currently employ just one full time qualified fostering social worker and take on consultants and freelance staff when necessary, for administrative, development and training support. They intend to expand the service and appoint a new Registered Manager, but have struggled to retain any managerial or senior staff they have appointed. The Registered Manager or a senior staff member, if in post, carries out regular, good quality professional supervision of social work staff. Fostering social workers, while qualified, do not always have the training or experience necessary to carry out assessments. Arrangements are not evident for them to do this under the supervision of an appropriately experienced social worker who takes responsibility for the assessment.

The agency has taken action to meet two previous regulatory shortfalls and two good practice recommendations. However, the improved complaints procedure does not contain the most up-to-date contact information for Ofsted. The panel is now always quorate; all adults working with children now have a Criminal Records Bureau check and foster carers are now better trained in first aid, health and hygiene. These improvements result in better care for children and young people.

The Registered Manager has established informal, but effective, partnership arrangements with placing authorities. They have a high level of satisfaction with the service and respect for foster carers' achievements in improving children's quality of life. The agency has an established record of accomplishment in training social workers. One university described their positive experience of the good quality placements and the value for students of 'the learning opportunity at the agency, complimented by good supervision.'

Foster carers feel involved and valued, saying that the agency 'pretty much involves us in their programme. The agency kept us happy and going.' The agency gathers their views at support groups and training, and involves them through update letters and newsletters. Children and young people give their views through the review process. Professionals say that foster carers and children speak highly of the service they receive and that this is a strength.

## 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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 independent fostering agencies.