

Children First Fostering Agency Ltd

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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| Date of last inspection | 22/10/2007 |

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good: this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Children First Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency established in April 1999 which aims to provide fostering placements for children and young people from birth to 18 years.

Children First Fostering Agency forms part of the National Fostering Agency Partnership (NFAP). NFAP consists of 5 independent fostering acquisitions. Whilst Children First Fostering agency forms part of the NFAP partnership, the agency retains its own identity and is responsible for its own day-to-day operational duties and responsibilities. The agency provides long-term, short-term and respite, bridging, emergency placement. In addition, parent and child placements. Children First is centrally managed from its head office in Basildon, Essex.

Summary

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

The purpose of this announced inspection was to assess the service against key national minimum standards and gauge improvements made to the service since the last inspection. All outcome areas were assessed.

Overall the service is judged to be good with some outstanding aspects. The fostering service offers well- matched quality placements where objectives are clear and consistent with the needs of children and young people. The service's assessments of prospective foster carers is robust and foster carers are generally well supervised and supported. The service is well run by a manager who is experienced and well qualified. The fostering agency's quality assurance systems are sound.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection, which was conducted in October 2007, resulted in one requirement and four recommendations. Children, young people and fostering families are appropriately consulted with for annual reviews. Recommendations in relation to; developing a fire risk assessment and evacuation procedures; staff accessing team meetings and improvement to the standard of recordings, have been all addressed. The current Registered Manager is suitably qualified, therefore meeting this recommendation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The fostering service promotes a good healthy lifestyle for children and young people in placement. Foster carers are provided with relevant policies on health guidelines which have recently been reviewed and updated. The guidance covers issues such as a child's emotional, mental and sexual well-being, hygiene, the use of illicit drugs and sexual behaviour.

Children's and young people's files clearly demonstrate that they are promptly registered with doctors, dental and optical services, and other specialist health services as required. Carers support children and young people to attend for essential routine health checks and these are recorded on a separate health log. The log also includes a record of all accidents and illnesses. There are detailed records with regard to health checks for children and young people which are collated and centrally held. These demonstrate that relevant checks are up to date. Carers confirm that they receive relevant information in relation to health issues. Supervising social workers check that the health needs of children are met during supervision visits to foster carers.

Arrangements for medical consents are clear at the outset of the placement. Foster carers are very aware of their role and responsibility in keeping children in their care healthy. Good health information is provided to carers in the carer's handbook. While carers are provided with clear information in relation to meeting the health needs of children and young people they have not all received relevant health related training, in particular first aid.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service keeps children and young people safe while in placement with foster carers. The manager has appropriate qualifications, skills, experience and an excellent knowledge of child care and fostering. The staff group are also well-qualified and experienced social workers with extensive knowledge and experience in fostering. Staff personnel files evidence that the service's recruitment and vetting practices are robust. Files demonstrated that full information as required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 is in place prior to staff commencing employment.

The foster carers provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. Foster carers spoken with confirm that the assessment process was thorough and explored well their life experiences, skills and knowledge of caring for children and young people. Completed assessments evidence that staff explore all required competencies well. The assessment process includes an evaluation of carers' homes, including health and safety checks. Carers also receive an annual checks to ensure that foster children remain safely accommodated. The agency ensures that all foster carers are

able to provide accommodation which is comfortable, suitably furnished and meets the needs of children and young people.

The service has clear procedures in place for matching children with prospective carers. Detailed information on matching is recorded on the carers' files. Case files evidence that all parties are fully consulted in an attempt to secure the best possible match for looked after children that meet their short term and long term needs. The placement agreement meeting addresses any specific matching considerations, such as safer caring and family contact issues. Any issues are identified and addressed.

The fostering service protects children from all forms of abuse and neglect. The safety of children has high priority amongst the staff group. The assessment process of prospective carers keenly explores issues relating to the safeguarding of children and young people. There are clear policies in place in relation to safer caring and safeguarding. This provides clear guidance of the expectation of safer caring and how to report child protection issues. Staff and foster carers are very familiar with the organisation's child protection procedures. Child protection training is covered in the three day 'Skills to Foster' training that carers receive prior to their assessment. Foster carers confirm that they receive training and clear written guidance that is focussed on keeping children safe.

The safety of children in placement is a consistent feature of carers' supervision. A generic safe care policy document is used which supervising social workers discuss at placement agreement meetings with the carers and the child's social worker. This enables any specific concerns to be addressed, clear records of these meetings are made. The manager takes allegations made against carers seriously. Child protection incidents are recorded and reported to relevant professionals. The fostering agency maintains a central list of all allegations made against foster carers. This provides the manager with a clear overview of the numbers and nature of the allegations and outcomes. A risk assessment is undertaken if there are any traces on the Enhanced Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks on foster carers, birth children, support networks and children over 18 years who are looked after.

Foster carers are fully aware of their role in reporting any significant issues relating to the welfare and safety of any child or young person. They are provided with relevant information on acceptable forms of discipline and this is known and understood by them. Information and guidance relating to bullying, and children missing from placements are in place. Incidents are clearly recorded on carer's files.

Staff working in or for the fostering service are entirely suitable to work with children and young people. The service has comprehensive staff recruitment and selection policies and procedures in place and the organisation conducts staff recruitment fully in accordance with the regulations. The service completes CRB checks and statutory checks on staff on a two-yearly basis to ensure children and young people benefit from a rigorous vetting process.

The fostering panel is efficiently and effectively organised. No fostering panel was observed during the inspection; however, the minutes of three previous fostering

panel meetings were reviewed. Records demonstrate that the panel performs its quality assurance role extremely well. Panel discussion and decisions are clear and thorough. For example, any issue regarding the standard of assessments or missing documentation shortfalls are highlighted and appropriate decisions are made to defer if necessary. Panel meeting's minutes are of a very good standard.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people benefit from the fostering service's understanding and valuing of equality and diversity issues. The agency has a range of policies and procedures in place to ensure children are looked after appropriately. These are comprehensive and address differences with regard to diversity issues such as disability, culture and religion. Documentation such as form F assessments, records of supervisory visits and the foster care agreement demonstrate that issues of equality and diversity are consistently addressed.

Foster carers encourage and facilitate children's involvement in hobbies and leisure activities. Supervising social worker discuss the recreational activities that children and young people, take part in both supported by the carer and the school. Feedback is also provided by the children and young people through the children's annual questionnaire. The agency arranged 'picnic in the park' for children and young people placed with foster carers during the summer. Feedback from those attending the event is positive. The agency is in the process of consulting with children and young people to inform the planning for next year's event. Surveys completed by children and young people indicate that they are happy and well supported by their foster carers.

Children and young people are supported to achieve well in school and to experience a wide range of leisure activities. The agency promotes the educational development of children and young people in placement. Foster carers are very clear about their roles and responsibilities in addressing the educational needs of children and young people in their care. They are proactive in putting in place strategies to support children and young people to achieve positive outcomes in education. Foster carers liaise closely with schools and colleges attending meetings when required. Supervising social workers attend personal education plan meetings wherever possible to provide foster carers with support to meet the educational needs of children and young people in placement. There are young people currently accessing permanent employment and further education. One carer stated 'the service is excellent, the child is always first, they try to ensure every child has a positive outcome'.

The fostering service is not providing short-term breaks for children and young people at this time.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The agency promotes contact arrangements for children in accordance with established care plans drawn up by the placing authority and/or the courts. Foster carers are fully aware of the expectation that they support and facilitate contact between children and young people and their birth family members.

Children and young people's case files evidence clear and accurate information about the arrangements for contact that are in place. Supervising social workers ensure that during supervisory visits they explore any issues around contact with foster carers. Carers have a clear understanding of the need to promote and facilitate contact and they support children and young people well, where issues arise with contact arrangements.

The fostering service promotes consultation with young people. Children and young people confirm that they have ample opportunity to meet and speak with staff of the service privately. Case files indicate that supervisory visits routinely include private discussion with looked after children. Children, young people and their foster carers are aware of the service's complaints procedure. There are few complaints; records demonstrate that they are dealt with efficiently and effectively.

All children and young people are given a copy of the children's guide when they arrive in placement. The guide contains creative, appropriate information relating to making complaints. Staff seek formal feedback from children and young people in placement about placement issues and the organisation in general, on a regular basis. Documentation demonstrates that the agency consults with foster carers' birth children throughout the assessment process. Birth children's views on fostering are recorded and any concerns are addressed appropriately. The annual reviews provides feedback from both birth children and looked after children.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The fostering service prepares young people to live independent lives. Foster carers have access to training and supervision focussed on this aspect of the fostering task. Foster carers demonstrate practical work they have completed with young people to achieve greater independence. These include budgeting, shopping and cooking skills. Young people are provided with good opportunities to develop new interests and experiences. Staff and carers support young people in achieving their hopes and ambitions. Supervision records demonstrate, and discussions with carers confirm, that young people are valued as individuals and that their personal, educational and social development is promoted.

Foster carers are also routinely saving money for children in their care, while they encourage older young people to do so for themselves. The agency has good

financial systems in place and foster carers indicate that they receive prompt payment at the expected rate at all times. The fostering service provides foster carers with advice and guidance with regard to their entitlements.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency's Statement of Purpose provides clear detail of its aims and objectives and of the services provided. The management team has defined roles and clear lines of accountability. Since the previous inspection a new manager has been appointed. Staff understand the aims and objectives of the agency and their role in achieving those. The fostering service is well monitored; there are systems in place to address practice and administrative issues such as team meetings; file audits and the quality assurance functions of the service's fostering panel. The service has a clear management structure in place that is understood by staff and foster carers. There are efficient financial procedures in place.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Equality and diversity is embedded in the agency's policies and procedures and is reflected in practice. Management, staff and carers have a good level of understanding of diversity issues. There are a range of approved foster carers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds which enables children's specific needs regarding their culture or religion to be met.

Assessment and approvals of foster carers are managed and implemented effectively. On occasion the agency uses external assessors to assess prospective foster carers when required. Foster carers are complimentary of the assessment process. The quality of the assessments is monitored well through the fostering panel. Foster carers are provided with good information once approved. Carers have access to policies and procedures and a handbook which is relevant to the care and support that they provide to children in their care. The annual household reviews are conducted in an efficient manner all of which are up to date and include feedback from birth and looked after children in placement.

Training programmes are available to carers who are very complimentary of the quality of training provided. The programme of training has been developed alongside the commitment to deliver the Children's Workforce Development Council's training standards for foster carers. Records are maintained of training undertaken. However, the annual reviews do not provide foster carers with an appraisal of their training and future development is not highlighted. This may mean that foster carers are unaware of any training needs that they may need to address in the following year. Both staff and carers say that formal and informal support is of a good standard. However, some carers have had sporadic supervision due to staff vacancies. The new manager is currently supporting carers to address this issue. Records of foster carer supervision evidence that carers are provided with appropriate advice and assistance by their supervising social workers. One carer stated 'we have excellent training and a good support network'. Another stated, 'the fostering service have an excellent team who are available 24 hours. The support is

always there in any situation’.

Staff maintain administrative records extremely well. Records are permanent and secure and staff manage information confidentially. Records of individual checks and references are well documented on file. Records of children and young people demonstrate that the appropriate looked after children paperwork is in place. The agency has a robust system for monitoring the receipt of paperwork from placing authorities. Administration staff follow up seeking missing paperwork effectively. Separate records are kept for complaints and allegations. All foster carers have signed carers’ agreements on file. All paper work is clear and documentation is extremely well organised.

What must be done to secure future 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 Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

| Std. | Action | Due date |
|------|---|------------|
| 22 | ensure that the written foster care agreements covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 are adhered to. This is with reference to the regularity of supervision that carers are to receive (Regulation 28(5) (b)) | 28/02/2011 |

Recommendations

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

- ensure each carer is given basic training on health and hygiene issues and first aid, with particular emphasis on health promotion and communicable diseases (NMS 12.5)
- ensure that each carer’s annual review includes an appraisal of training and development needs (NMS 23.8)