

Children First Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Children First Fostering Agency provides support to 77 children and young people in the Essex, Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire and London areas. The agency has 66 foster households. The fostering agency is able to provide bridging, respite, short term, long term and permanent placements. The agency also provides preparation for adoption placements and parent and child placements. The fostering agency which was registered with Ofsted on 1 April 2007 has contracts with a range of local authorities.

This independent fostering agency is privately owned and is a part of the National Fostering Agency (NFA) group.

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**

The fostering agency provides a good level of care with outstanding features. Children benefit from nurturing homes where they thrive. They individually make excellent progress in relation to their health, education and well-being. They are growing in confidence, independence and maturity which contribute to their increased self-esteem. Placing authorities say that carers are competent and caring and make a great difference in children's lives.

Meticulous matching of placements means that placement breakdown is rare. In some cases planned temporary placements have been so successful that children have remained long term, preventing them experiencing further disruptive moves and the associated trauma. This provides opportunity for children to grow up in exceptionally stable environments with their siblings, where possible. Where children have complex needs or are placed with carers who are of a different background to them, full consideration is given to how their needs can be well met.

Children are welcomed as part of the family and have opportunities to enjoy new experiences and share good-quality family life. They develop strong bonds with their carers and as a result show increased emotional resilience. Children feel safe and protected by carers who have their best interests at heart. They are secure in the knowledge that carers will support and advocate for them. Carers help them to understand some of the risks they place themselves at; this helps them improve their personal safety.

Agency staff are well trained and work well in partnership with other agencies to ensure children are effectively safeguarded. Staff say: 'It's a great environment to work in, as well as a forever improving agency, which is fantastic to be a part of.'

Carers are well supported. They refer to a 'friendly' and 'reliable' agency' with staff who 'care about their carers'. Carers are provided with a wealth of training opportunities, however, the manager has been asked to ensure that the small number of main carers and a significant proportion of second carers who have yet to complete core training do so. The manager has also been asked to ensure that no prospective carers are presented to panel until all suitability checks are in place and that no placements in excess of 'the usual fostering limit' occur unless an exemption has been approved. There was no impact for children in respect of either of these requirements.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))	14/12/2015
The fostering service provider may carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and whom they consider may be suitable to become a foster parent ("X"), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. The fostering service provider must obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family, and any other information they consider relevant. In particular; ensure a suitable Disclosure and Barring Service check is in place for all applicants before they are assessed as suitable. (Regulation 26 (1) (1A)(a))	26/10/2015
A person may exceed the usual fostering limit if he is exempted from it by the local authority within whose area he lives. In particular; arrange for the placement of no more than three children in a fostering household without an exemption having been formally approved. (Children Act 1989 Schedule 7 (4)(1))	26/10/2015

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children are thriving nurturing environments which provide them with a secure base. They receive high quality care highly individualised care and support which meets their particular needs. They are growing in confidence, independence and maturity which contribute to their increased self-esteem. Placement breakdowns are rare and they have the opportunity to grow up in stable environments with their siblings, wherever possible. Some children have lived with their carers for many years and choose to call them 'mum and dad'.

Children experience positive parenting and develop strong bonds with their carers and as a result show increased emotional resilience. They feel safe, welcomed and loved and are able to understand some of the risks they place themselves at. This helps them improve their personal safety. They know that their carers will help them deal with any issues of bullying including discriminatory comments. Comments from children included: 'I can talk to my carer about anything and I know she will listen'.

Placing authorities highlight the positive attachments children form with their foster families and how well they are supported when matched with carers from a different background. Social workers state this is 'the best environment' for their children referring to competent carers who make a great difference in children's lives. For example, one commented that they had seen the child's self-esteem and confidence grow enabling to challenge their school on the quality of school lunches, successfully effecting change.

Placements are well planned and this helps children settle. They receive an excellent variety of information targeted to their age and development, such as, the 'Rover' story book helping younger children understand fostering. They also receive excellent carer welcome profiles and information about the agency. This contains information on how to complain, and includes photographs and contact details for all staff in the agency. This helps children understand how to, and with whom they raise any issues of concern.

Children are healthy and receive excellent support to lead healthy lifestyles. If children have specialist needs, such as allergies, the impact of this is minimised where possible. For example, one carer takes in home-baked allergy free cakes to school so that the child does not feel different from their peers. Children and young people are able to access appropriate therapeutic services where required and receive guidance on sexual health. Young people reflect on how they have matured and become more skilled in managing their own behaviour. This has helped them develop more positive relationships and engage more fruitfully in education.

The vast majority of children are making excellent progress socially, emotionally,

educationally and in their health and well-being. A significant number are exceeding expectations in all aspects of their lives including their education. A number of young people have gone on to university having benefitted from excellent support and career development advice. It is rare for a child not to be attending school, however, where this occurs there are concerted efforts to help them to work towards this.

Children say they like their carers and do lots of fun things. They enjoy a variety of activities which provide opportunities to develop their interests and experience new things, such as, scuba diving, meals out, visits to Legoland and the Rainforest Cafe. Enrichment opportunities are explored and children respond positively to the encouraging attitude of their foster carers. Those with talents are able to pursue these, for example, representing their school in dancing and athletics, joining local football teams or learning to play music. These experiences build memorable moments and increases children's confidence and resilience.

Opportunities to participate in a variety of community events, such as, the local village fun run are enjoyed. Young people also have the opportunity to focus on their personal development through their involvement in citizenship schemes and fundraising for local charities. One young person has taken this to an international level securing them self an opportunity to volunteer in Thailand.

Young people are well supported in preparing for living independently. They are able to remain in placement on 'Staying Put' arrangements which helps ensure a smoother transition into adult life. One carer spoke of how their foster child 'happily recalls his time staying with us and is proud of his 'family man cooking skills' he claims he got from us! We are still coming to terms with being call 'Mum and Dad 'and our birth sons are his brothers, the only thing we weren't prepared for was being called 'Nanny and Grandad !' This is one strong example of how foster children sometimes become such an integral part of the extended family.

Without exception all of the feedback from children and young people about their carers was highly complementary and can be summed up in one child's comment of 'I'm happy here'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Foster carers with a variety of backgrounds and experience are recruited and are able to meet the complex needs of children placed. Children say their foster carers are 'really nice'. The agency has been creative in its use of community organisations to reach new audiences of potential carers.

Assessment processes are in the vast majority of cases robust with suitably qualified social workers undertaking all checks on suitability and examining applicants parenting capacity before presenting to panel. However, on one occasion one carer was presented to panel, prior to a suitable check being received. The applicant was approved subject to receipt of this check, therefore without a complete assessment of their suitability. Approval of applicants prior to receipt of all suitability checks has the potential to place children at risk. The agency having reflected on this case is clear this is not something that would be repeated. This was an exception to otherwise robust processes. There was no impact on children as the manager ensured that the carer did not undertake induction or have access to children until suitable clearance was received.

Panel membership is diverse with a variety of skill base and life experience. The panel includes a person with childhood experience of life in care. Panel members are well supported through regular training opportunities, good administrative systems and effective appraisal systems.

The agency provides an admirable breadth of training to carers, staff and panel members which promote their professional development. The vast majority of foster carers have completed the training and development standards, are well trained and have a good working knowledge of fostering. In response to carer feedback the agency has developed the 'carer's academy.' This is a 10 week training programme which delivers targeted training to an advanced level.

However, some carers have not undertaken core training sufficiently frequently in key areas, such as, child protection, and first aid. Child sexual exploitation and self harm are not considered core training despite referrals for children with these needs being received. This potentially means some carers may not be well equipped to deal with the challenges children present or be up-to-date with changes in statutory guidance and best practice. The potential impact is reduced as carers currently providing support for children with such needs are appropriately matched.

Carers understand their role and are well supported through regular focused supervision. Supervising social workers provide high quality personalised support, carers said: 'they get to know your own family, they talk to your children' and the agency provides 'strong support' with a personal touch'. For example, supervising

social workers, taking children out on activities, to allow a carer sufficient opportunity to deal with recent bereavements. Carers refer to excellent support 24 hours a day one commented: 'There is always someone available at the end of the phone'.

Foster carers feel respected and valued. One carer said: 'I love being a foster carer. Its putting in all the information, skills and love to help them; to instil some good things in them, to see them through, even to help them with their own children.'

Carers work well in partnership with the agency, parents and professionals to ensure children's needs are met. The vast majority of children accompany carers on family events and holidays, the use of respite services is therefore infrequent. Foster carers support carers are often members of their family which provides consistency for children. Criminal records checks are undertaken on support carers and they are able to access training through the agency. The manager is reviewing how they can further strengthen the quality of these arrangements.

Meticulous matching ensures exceptionally stable placements and good retention of foster carers. For example, children with disabilities are placed with carers who have experience of supporting children with complex needs. Furthermore where children are placed with carers who are of a different background to them full consideration is given to how their needs can be well met through a heritage plan. One young person said: 'the agency did a good job of matching me with this carer'.

Carers promote children's healthy lifestyles, for example, encouraging them to be aware of the health risks of fizzy drinks. They are also given good advice and guidance around keeping safe and sexual health. Children who exhibit self harming behaviours are well supported including maintaining daily contact and support throughout any hospital admission as would a caring parent.

The agency has funded the therapeutic assessment of individual children's emotional well-being successfully advocating for further specific early intervention. Delivery of which promotes children's emotional well-being and long-term resilience. The recently introduced therapist role stimulates staff and carers to develop their skills further enhancing the quality of support provided to children.

The organisation has effective systems for chasing up outstanding local authority documentation, such as, care or personal education plans. The recent introduction of an education advisor is intended to introduce greater scrutiny of individual educational outcomes and promote carers awareness and support them where appropriate, challenge schools. This demonstrates the agency's commitment to further developing its systems for monitoring and promoting educational outcomes.

Children are warmly welcomed into the fostering family as part of the wider family network. One young person said: 'The best thing about here is that from the first moment I came here I felt welcome'. Children have opportunities to enjoy new experiences and share good-quality family life experience, such as, family events,

religious celebrations and family holidays. Their achievements are celebrated and their photos are displayed alongside those of birth children.

The fostering agency is held in high regard by local commissioners and placing social workers who have confidence that the agency will only offer placements where they are confident that the carer can meet the child's needs.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Safeguarding is central to all practice within the agency. The manager has effective systems in place to monitor key safeguarding issues, such as, missing from care and risks of child sexual exploitation.

Robust recruitment practices protect children from unsuitable people gaining employment with the agency. All staff and panel members are subject to checks on their suitability which are in line with both regulatory and best practice guidance.

Children say they feel safe and they are well safeguarded by their carers. Good-quality risk assessments guide carers in how to keep children safe and help them take age-appropriate risks, developing an understanding of how to protect themselves.

Carers receive clear guidance and reinforcement of the importance of safe care. As a result foster carers understand it is one of their most important responsibilities to keep children safe. However, some carers have not undertaken core training in child protection and safeguarding within the last three years. Training regarding child sexual exploitation is not currently defined as core training. Where carers are not abreast of the latest developments and guidance regarding key safeguarding issues this has the potential to undermine a robust response in cases of emergency.

Agency staff conduct two unannounced visits each year to foster carers and routinely meet with the children in placement. This provides opportunities for children to raise any concerns should they feel the need. Staff are very clear on their role and share this with children who place themselves at risk saying 'We are all in this business to care for you and to know that you are safe'.

Levels of missing from care are low. Children reduce their missing from care incidents substantially meaning that they are safer as a result of being placed with their carers. Where they do go missing supervising social workers and foster carers understand and implement local protocols effectively. Carers refer to 'liaising with three different police forces to ensure everyone was up to date with the information' she had about where the child might be. Carers feel well supported by the agency

when working with children who go missing; they ensure the child knows that the carer worries about them. One carer said: 'If my young people are known to go missing I always say to them- don't send me a text, call me because I need to hear your voice to know that you are safe.'

One placing social worker said that their child received all possible support reflecting 'the carer had a difficult job', they also referred to the 'excellent communication from the agency' which promoted effective multiagency working.

Any issues of a safeguarding nature are swiftly and appropriately managed and the agency appropriately addresses standards of care concerns. The Local Authority Designated Safeguarding Officer (LADO) referred to senior agency staff as being 'child focused in their approach and having a good understanding of child protection'.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The appropriately qualified and experienced registered manager has been in post for 18 months. They in partnership with their senior team, provide enthusiastic, visible and effective leadership. The manager is passionate about their role and purpose effectively communicating their aspirations to deliver a high quality child focused service. Equality and diversity is threaded through the service ensuring children's, carers and staff's individual needs are met.

On one occasion within the past year a child was temporarily placed with carers in excess of the usual fostering limit. This was a positive arrangement for the child. The carers were important people in this child's life who were able to meet all of their complex needs. Staff worked transparently and all placing agencies agreed to the suitability of the arrangement. However, the legally required exemption for the carers having four unrelated children in placement, therefore exceeding the usual fostering limit, was not obtained. This potentially placed the carers at risk of committing an offence of operating an unregistered children's home.

All feedback received from carers is highly positive. They refer to receiving 'exceptional' levels of support from the agency. Where carers resign the reasons for this are fully explored. Staff are well-qualified and knowledgeable which is recognised by carers and placing authorities.

The agency provides a positive working environment for staff where their opinions are valued and they contribute to service development. This has helped the agency achieve the gold level investors in people award. Staff highlight that they are very well supported within a transparent working environment where 'everybody pulls

together as a team'. As a result staff changes are rare.

The manager is keen to further develop the service promoting improved outcomes for children. For example, a therapist is helping staff and carers undertake reflective, solution-focused social work which carefully considers children's needs. The newly appointed education advisor is developing, improved monitoring and robust scrutiny of educational progress outcomes for children. Both of these recent developments within the service will further enhance the quality of support provided to children and their carers.

Individual outcomes for children are comprehensively monitored and feedback is sought at supervising social worker visits and as part of carer's annual reviews. In order to better understand the strengths and opportunities for improving children's involvement, the manager commissioned an independent review by LILAC (a national organisation of care experienced young people) into how well the agency involves and listens to looked-after children. This further demonstrates the organisation's commitment to involving children in the service more effectively.

The agency is held in high regard by partner agencies having developed highly effective working relationships with local authorities and partner agencies. All partner professionals comment positively on the stability of placements and the quality of care provided both to individual children and across the agency as a whole.

The manager has been proactive and imaginative in their approach to building community relationships, using these as an opportunity to both raise the services profile; promoting potential recruitment of carers; and enabling children to have fun. Strong community partnerships with other organisations, such as, the Princes Trust, local animal sanctuaries, and career development and housing services promote children's knowledge of and access to the widest available support networks.

Complaints from carers are very rare and none have been received within the past 18 months. Any issues raised by placing authorities are well managed with appropriate action taken.

The agency is well resourced to meet the services outlined in the statement of purpose. Children benefit from their own age-appropriate guides, which helps them make sense of the fostering experience and details external parties they can contact if they have any concerns.

The service has good monitoring systems in place and has a clear development plan to drive improvement. Notifiable events are appropriately reported to all relevant parties.

The provider has taken suitable action to address the requirements and majority of recommendations made at the previous inspection and as a result the quality of care and support has improved. Breaches of regulation identified at this inspection are an

exception to the norm and have had no impact on the care of children. The manager has clear knowledge of the regulations and the agency a good history of complying with regulations and standards. The manager has a sincere desire to provide an outstanding service and is committed to implementing a meticulous management approach to ensure all fostering activity is consistent with regulations, standards and best practice.

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.