

Fostering People Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Tracy Murty
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering People is an independent fostering agency that is a wholly owned subsidiary of a larger company. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, short-term, bridging, sanctuary seeking, remand, transitions, parent and child and long-term placements. The agency provided placements for 346 children and young people in 263 fostering households on 5 October 2015. It currently has 46 assessments of prospective foster carers underway.

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: **Outstanding**

Fostering People is an outstanding independent fostering agency which meets the complex needs of children and young people exceptionally well. As a result, they form meaningful attachments with their carers, feel safe and make significant progress in all aspects of their lives, from their starting points. The agency provides excellent support and training to its foster carers and staff. This promotes a real sense of professionalism and leads to placement stability for children and young people. A commissioning officer stated: 'I am impressed by the hard work the staff complete to ensure positive outcomes for children and young people placed with them. I would highly recommend placing with this agency to any council.'

The agency has an excellent understanding of the needs of children and young people requiring foster placements and recruits, prepares, assesses and trains a range of skilled foster carers to meet those needs. Carers spoken with during the

inspection were all exceptionally positive about working for this agency. They feel highly supported by agency social workers and managers. The range and quality of training provided to carers is excellent, with one carer stating: 'The training provided to us is over and above what I expected, it is brilliant and really helps me.' Foster carers feel valued and work as part of the team around the child.. Attention to detail and robust systems ensures that all carers feel supported and have the skills to support those children and young people placed with them.

Agency staff and managers have particularly strong and positive working relationships with a range of stakeholders, professionals and agencies. Managers routinely monitor and track all aspects of the care provided to children and young people, to ensure that their complex needs are met. Managers have sought advice and support from experts in relation to education and child sexual exploitation. This has led to increased training and monitoring and improved outcomes in these areas. A specialist in child sexual exploitation stated: 'This agency is exceptional in its work on child sexual exploitation. They are on the ball and definitely ahead of other agencies in relation to this area of work.'

The agency has excellent systems in place to monitor and track the educational attendance and attainment of all children and young people placed. This has led to significant improvements in examination results for many young people this year. Carers receive additional training to support young people in preparation for their exams, resulting in them gaining qualifications and moving on to further education or employment. For some young people, such achievements would not have been thought possible prior to moving to this agency. Pupils achieving grade A*-C in English and Maths was 42% in 2015, compared to the national average for looked after young people of 14.20% in 2014. This reflects the dedication and skills of agency staff and carers in improving educational outcomes for young people.

Placement stability within this agency has remained similar to previous years, with unplanned endings equating to 15% of all placements made as at 31 March 2015. This is broadly in line with national comparator figures for independent fostering agencies. Managers undertake regular monitoring and review of placement endings and use data collected to inform assessment and training of carers.

Children and young people feel central to the care they receive. The agency regular consults with them on all aspects of the care and services provided to them. One young person commented: 'The agency and my carers are great. They listen to me and want to know my views on everything.' The agency is a learning organisation, with a clear focus on continually improving the quality of care and outcomes and experiences for children and young people. Many areas of practice within the agency have been informed by research, commissioned by the agency from experts. This reflects the learning culture within the agency and its desire to continually learn and improve. The registered manager is inspirational and supported by an equally inspirational, dedicated and skilled management team.

No breaches of regulations have been identified as a result of this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Information provided to children and young people prior to their placement starting is excellent. They also receive profile information about their carers, which further supports a smooth transition for them to their new placement. One young person was able to consider a number of profiles of carers and select the one they wanted to be placed with. This reflects the agency's commitment to meaningful consultation and engagement with children and young people from the start of their placements with this agency. It also leads to improved placement stability and outcomes for children and young people.

Children and young people make significant progress in relation to their educational attendance and achievements. For some, their attendance prior to moving to their foster placement was very limited. From such starting points, they have gone on to achieve excellent examination results and enrolled on further education courses. This is further supported by the agency's commitment to staying put placements. This provides young people with the additional security of being able to remain with their foster carers beyond their 18th birthdays. Of the 15 young people who turned 18 during 2014-15, 40% remained with their carer. This is an increase for the agency from the previous year and reflects their commitment to young people. The agency has also accessed educational attendance and attainment data on each placed child and young person from the Department for Education. This information is being analysed alongside consideration of the known performance and inspection judgements for each educational establishment children and young people placed with this agency attend. Such innovative and research led practice enables the agency to have a complete understanding of children and young people's starting points, as well as assisting in effectively mapping and planning their educational futures.

Through positive and close working with placing authorities, robust matching and consideration of needs, siblings are placed together wherever possible, and if identified in their care plan as appropriate. One placing social worker commended the agency for enabling two siblings to be placed together, having been apart for some considerable time. Carers also act as strong advocates for young people's contact with wider family. One carer has supported a young person to seek legal advice in relation to contact issues recently. This demonstrates the total commitment of the agency and carers to promoting appropriate sibling placements and meaningful contact. A young person stated: 'My carer has been so supportive of me, she helped get me a solicitor and comes to meetings with me. I am so grateful for what she has done for me.'

The voice of children and young people is very evident in how this agency operates. Staff and managers actively seek out and welcome children and young people's views on a wide range of topics. Regular feedback is sought from them, with incentives being in place to encourage them to share their views. The fostering panel

uses questions devised by young people to inform its recommendations of prospective new carers. A group of currently looked after young people, former looked after young people and birth children of carers has recently been involved in updating the children's website for the agency. These are just a small number of examples of how the agency seeks out the views and contributions of all children and young people. Their contributions inform the agency development plan and how the agency continually strives to improve in all areas of its work.

Children and young people also access a wide range of social activities and events, either with their carers or through events organised by the agency. The agency has a choir, which some young people, carers and agency staff belong to. There are also regional and national football teams, made up of foster and birth children, with regular competitions. Currently, the agency is actively working with a student exchange programme from overseas. This provides children and young people with an opportunity to learn about other cultures and has increased their awareness of equality and diversity issues. This further evidences how this agency imaginatively and skilfully engages children and young people in activities which widen their experiences and confidence.

The agency and its carers place a strong emphasis on ensuring the welfare and safety of all children and young people. Robust and excellent monitoring and tracking systems enable staff and managers to have a clear and relevant understanding of any concerning behaviours of children and young people. The agency has trained and supported a number of staff to take a lead in relation to sexual exploitation. Experts in this area have been commissioned to devise and implement training and support to carers and young people. Such initiatives reflect the agency's deeply embedded learning culture and desire to support young people to reduce and eradicate any concerning behaviours.

Staff and carers also demonstrate a detailed awareness and understanding of the reasons why some children and young people go missing. Excellent systems and monitoring by managers, close partnership working with relevant agencies and commitment to ensuring return interviews are conducted has led to reductions in such behaviours. Carers receive very high calibre training to support their ability to meet the complex needs and behaviours of those children and young people placed with them. Children and young people devise safer caring policies with staff and carers. This promotes a real sense of ownership and understanding of any concerning or potentially risky behaviours.

The holistic health needs of children and young people placed are exceptionally well met. Health passports are issued to carers at the start of a placement. These set out full health related information and provide children and young people with a valuable document of how their health needs have been met. Carers have access to a suitably qualified therapist, who provides monthly consultation and support group meetings. Carers report very high levels of satisfaction at this flexible service. One carer stated: 'The therapist was able to offer me support at a time of need, this really helped me and I know I can call or meet with her to discuss my own or the children's needs. This service is invaluable.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency offers placements to children and young people with a variety of complex needs including disabled children and young people and those whose behaviour brings a variety of challenges. Good communication with commissioners ensures that the agency is fully aware of the needs of local authorities and the children for whom placements are needed.

Comprehensive and well-considered systems and processes underpin the preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers. Initial visits ensure that enquirers are fully aware of the fostering task and used to highlight any areas which need further exploration. The use of independent assessors is supported by very clear expectations of the agency. A systematic approach is used to ensure they operate consistently which also helps to address any concerns at any early stage. The practice guidance used is informed by research to promote strong assessments. Foster carers have described assessments as 'very efficient'. Last year 93.3 % of the assessments were completed within timescales and there were good reasons why there was a delay in the other cases. This is closely monitored both by the agency and the panel. Foster carers are well prepared for the task of fostering by the skills to foster training and the assessment.

The fostering panel provides a very rigorous quality assurance function to ensure that only those people who are suitable to foster are recommended for approval, or continue to be assessed as suitable. Thus safe placements are promoted. The central list comprises members with a variety of personal and professional experience of fostering. Panel administration is extremely efficient, thereby ensuring members have the papers in good time to give them their full consideration.

The panel chair, who is extremely experienced, has a calm and inclusive approach to managing the panel to ensure applicants are treated with respect and receive a warm welcome. Questions from children are used to ensure the panel retains a good child focus.

Minutes are thorough and produced in good time, to enable the agency decision maker to make a considered decision with full information. The agency decision maker takes his responsibilities very seriously. His approach is supported by a decision making tool based on research on what makes a good foster carer. He also considers findings from serious case reviews and training to inform his decision.

If applicants are minded to withdraw from the process, they are clearly informed of their rights to have the assessment assessed and thereby access the independent review mechanism if the agency decides not to approve them. This is really positive and over and above what many agencies do if applicants choose to withdraw. This adds transparency and fairness to the agency's procedures. Reviews are timely and

carried out by independent reviewers to add robustness.

Matching is a real strength. Universally, foster carers confirm there is no pressure to take a placement. Supervising social workers support this view and if they feel the placement is inappropriate, they are listened to. There is a thorough and systematic approach to matching which takes into consideration the need for appropriate permissions from the local authority for exemptions and placing alongside other children in placement. The placements team develops good working relationships with the foster carers, which starts at their approval and continues throughout. They have a robust understanding of what carers can offer. A comprehensive matching tool supports good placements which meet the child's or young person's needs.

Training is another strength of the agency. Foster carers describe it as 'excellent'. It is varied, relevant and under constant review. Carers are asked their views, and their training needs are identified annually and inform the training programme. External or bespoke training is also sourced where necessary. For example, a foster carer was supported to undertake level 2 British sign language training, to enable her to care for a deaf child. Of particular note is the advanced attachment training which carers describe as 'absolutely amazing'. One carer commented that it enabled her to see the child as 'a hurting child' and not take the challenging behaviours personally, thus contributing to placement stability. The agency has recognised that therapeutic training is essential to support carers with the children and young people they place, so are developing this further. Good systems are in place to monitor and track the training which carers undertake to ensure they complete the training, support and development standards within timescales and also meet the agency's expectations regarding core training.

Supervision of carers occurs regularly and is supportive. One carer said of her supervising social worker; 'She would be here in a heartbeat if I needed her.' The out of hours' service has been described as 'brilliant'. Thus carers are supported to sustain placements, which contributes towards placement stability.

Foster carers consider themselves as professionals and confirm that the agency treats them as such and values their views. They are supported to advocate for the children and young people in their care, including challenging other professionals. The agency is robust in pursuing missing documentation and has systems to ensure this is escalated where necessary. This includes delegated authority.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people gain in confidence in relation to how to protect themselves and in taking age-appropriate risks. One young person said: 'Since coming to live with my carers, I can now use public transport on my own, walk to the shops and go swimming alone. I couldn't do these things before I moved here and I am really proud.'

Carers demonstrate a detailed and clear awareness and understanding of the known and potential risks for children placed with them. Agency staff support them to constantly review and update care plans and risk assessments. Supervision of carers places a great emphasis on consideration of any actual or potential safeguarding concerns for children and young people. Clear action plans are set, and reviewed, to ensure that their needs are consistently being met.

Monitoring, training and support for carers in relation to sexual exploitation and missing incidents is excellent. The agency is exceptionally forward thinking in relation to these issues and has put in place clear systems, training and support for carers, children and young people. Information packs on sexual exploitation have been devised by lead staff in the agency, including information for young people. This demonstrates the total commitment of the agency in identifying and working to eradicate such concerning behaviours. Managers have clear systems in place to monitor and track all missing incidents and routinely chase placing authorities for information on return interviews and to convene meetings. Practice in relation to safeguarding is informed by research. The agency commissions the services of specialists in sexual exploitation, attachment and research centres to undertake training and research with staff and carers. The agency has been praised by specialists in these areas for their forward thinking and innovative approaches to safeguarding.

Carers receive a wide range of training, which supports and skills them to respond with confidence and competence to any actual or potential safeguarding concerns. They follow risk assessments and present as hugely resourceful in trying to secure the safe return of any young person placed with them who goes missing. This includes the use of social media, text and forming close relationships with family and friends of young people. One young person who had a history of missing incidents stated: 'My carer always tried to get me home safely. I haven't been missing for several months now, I want to try and do well in school and know that my carer really cares and worries about me if I go missing.'

The agency has excellent recruitment, assessment, supervision and training in place for its carers. Carers receive at least two unannounced visits each year by agency staff. Staff ensure that they meet alone with children and young people at least every two months to elicit their wishes, feelings and views on their placement. Staff also ensure that the views of carers' birth children are sought and acted upon. An independent social worker carries out the annual reviews of each approved foster carer. They undertake audits of all documentation relating to carers and set action plans for any identified areas for development or improvement. This attention to detail and continual focus on safeguarding means that children and young people receive care and support from highly competent carers.

The recruitment processes for agency staff and fostering panel members is similarly robust and comprehensive. The agency not only takes up two references for new staff, but also seeks confirmation of all known previous employers for new staff. Employment histories are plotted out in a clear format, enabling managers and human resources colleagues to have a clear sense of any gaps and to follow these

up. Such attention to detail and recording of all checks prevents any unsuitable adults from having the opportunity to harm children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency is run and managed by a highly competent, dedicated and inspirational registered manager. He is supported by an equally impressive management team, who work closely and seamlessly to improve services for children and young people. Feedback from stakeholders and placing authorities is consistently positive about the excellent care and support provided to children and young people by this agency's carers and staff.

The registered manager is clear that children and young people should be at the centre of everything agency staff and carers do. He leads by example, with staff and carers reporting how approachable he is, with many referring to his 'open door policy' and in being able to contact him and all of the management team at any time. The management team displays a keen desire and commitment to including children and young people in all aspects of their care. Local and national social events and activities provide them with an opportunity to meet staff and other children and young people. Agency staff routinely send out birthday cards, certificates to celebrate achievement and vouchers to children and young people. One young person said: 'We always get a card and vouchers for our birthdays, I also got the same for doing well in my exams, which is really nice.' The agency also contacts all young people leaving care, sending certificates of achievements and inviting them to attend annual events. Young people feel valued by this imaginative practice and ongoing support.

Monitoring and review of all aspects of the services and support provided for children and young people is excellent. The agency has a head of quality assurance and safeguarding. This person has excellent systems in place to oversee all aspects of the service, from assessment and recruitment of carers to child protection and safeguarding issues. Quarterly and annual reports for the agency set out in great details any areas of concern or development. Development plans further set out goals for the agency and include the views of children, young people, agency staff and other stakeholders. Managers consistently strive to improve the quality of care and services provided, with very positive results. As one carer stated: 'I feel like part of a family working for this agency. They really value my views and contributions, the same for the children we look after. There is nothing they could do better or differently in my view.'

The agency's statement of purpose and children's guide provide detailed and clear information about their aims and objectives. The children's guides provide children and young people with very comprehensive information about the agency and their legal rights. Complaints receive prompt and through consideration and investigation by managers and the head of quality assurance. Children and young people report knowing how to make a complaint and in feeling that any concerns they raise will be

taken seriously and dealt with in a satisfactory manner. Agency staff and carers are also very proactive in advocating for children and young people's rights and challenge other agencies appropriately.

The agency continues to recruit new carers and has a robust and highly efficient recruitment team in place, overseen by a highly competent service manager. Matching is a key strength of the agency, with placing authorities and commissioners all reporting very positive and successful experiences. Carers report being fully included in decisions about potential placements and in feeling under no pressure to take placements. This reflects the management team's commitment to ensuring that high calibre carers are approved, who are able to provide stable and nurturing placements.

Clear systems ensure that all notifiable events are made to Ofsted and other relevant agencies in a timely manner. Action is taken to address any concerns, with all staff and carers demonstrating high levels of competence in relation to their roles and responsibilities. One recommendation was made at the last inspection, which has been met. Managers undertook an audit of core training for carers and have a simplified the system and number of core training courses they must attend post-approval. Carers undertake three-yearly refresher training in first aid, health and safety and safeguarding. This is alongside an extensive range of non- mandatory training, including online courses for second carers.

The agency has worked closely with a number of local authorities since the last inspection, to consider recruitment and sufficiency. Funding was provided by central government for the agency to undertake work with other independent fostering agencies and local authorities. A senior manager for a local authority involved in this work stated: 'This agency works incredibly proactively, they genuinely care for the children. It has been absolutely fabulous working with them on research into recruitment and community engagement.'

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.