

# Fostering People Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The agency is an independent fostering agency that is a wholly owned subsidiary of a larger company. Since the last inspection in 2008, the agency has expanded geographically and is now supporting carers in Central, East Midlands, North East, North West, Yorkshire regions. As a result, the agency has more than doubled in size and now has 202 carers and 280 children and young people.

The agency's Statement of Purpose details its capacity to offer emergency, short-term, bridging, parent and child and long-term placements for children aged between 0 and 18 years old.

### 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 **outstanding**.

The agency is now operating at an outstanding level. There is a particularly high level of enthusiasm, commitment and consistency, and monitoring is strong and varied. Leaders are dynamic and accessible. The needs of children and young people are central to everything that is undertaken and their views are routinely incorporated into organisational practices. Managers also take into account national developments and engage productively with partner agencies in a variety of initiatives. All personnel know that minor shortfalls are inevitable and therefore always seek improvement.

The last inspection was four years ago and made six recommendations, which have been addressed. Subsequent improvements have included the production of an engaging children's guide based on a story so younger children have a better understanding of foster care. Additionally, carers now benefit from a greater range of times to attend training, which improves their attendance rates and skills. Of greater significance is the agency's self-imposed drive to routinely learn and improve from any challenges. As a result, this inspection identifies no major shortfalls; one recommendation is made to improve an aspect of carer training. During the inspection, agency staff readily engaged in discussions about a broad range of other

developmental possibilities, as befits a 'learning organisation'.

Children and young people enjoy consistent placements in which disruptions are anticipated and prevented wherever possible. A clear process operates in which all parties invest. All transitions, which often occur for positive reasons, are supported well, and children and young people are glowing in their praise of the support they receive; they make clear progress. The same ethos of support is applied to staff and carers across the service.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that the reviews of each carer include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards. This is with regard to having clear and consistent standards about core training that are known to all those involved. (NMS 20.6)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Children and young people's views are routinely taken into account in all parts of the service exceedingly well. Their contribution toward shaping the future of the service is embedded every year in a revised participation document. This level of involvement also applies to their own care, the performance of their carers and that of supervising social workers. One professional said, 'children and young people are influential and empowered'. These expectations are well established and mean that children and young people know their wishes and feelings have a high value. They have a particularly positive perception of the agency and its managers because of this very high level of involvement and consultancy. They are on first name terms with senior personnel who, some say, would be their first port of call if they had a major concern. The contribution of children and young people has affected the recent improvement of family profiles; it also led to the creation of respite folders, which help facilitate effective respite placements. Children and young people have also been involved in producing an imaginative and thought provoking DVD, to help prospective carers understand children and young people's views and behaviour. They also assist with recruitment processes, carer training and have an input to panel processes.

Special emphasis is given to the rights of children and young people. Children and young people experience this principle on a daily basis through their carers and through regular contact with agency staff. Their views are given primary consideration in all matters affecting them from daily issues to decisions about their futures. All the children and young people who responded to the Ofsted survey were positive about their foster families. They are made to feel good about themselves

and their values are respected. One young person said, 'I have no religious beliefs but they let me be who I want to be'. As a result, children and young people experience substantial emotional progress. One carer said, 'we received a child with very little understanding of emotions who was determined to take no notice of help and instruction but who left with a hunger for knowledge and the ability to show and accept the warmth required for positive human contact without fear for her safety.'

Children and young people benefit from a clear focus on outcomes. Carers and external professionals unanimously agree that this is a clear priority for the service. As a result children and young people thrive in their placements and feel secure; they experience planned endings even when these are at short notice. A significant contribution has been made through the substantial and innovative initiatives undertaken with local authorities, professional organisations and carers regarding delegated authority. Consequently, children and young people benefit from greater clarity about what decisions can be made by their carers. This helps to normalise decision making and ensure that foster children feel integrated into their foster families.

Children and young people's health is given utmost priority. Routine health checks are recorded by carers in individual health passports and monitored by supervising social workers. Recording is readily adapted, for example to meet the additional health needs of children and young people who have disabilities. As a result of this close attention, children and young people benefit, for example, from a very low level of substance abuse; very few smoke. One child's social worker noted, 'children and young people are supported by trained carers to make appropriate choices; for example, they understand the consequences of drinking alcohol.' Individuals throughout the agency understand the particular importance of children and young people's emotional health too. External professionals note that carers have a clear understanding of the effect of abuse and importance of appropriate attachments. Carers greatly appreciate their access to confidential therapeutic advisors. This is a substantial contribution to them establishing and maintaining excellent relationships with children and young people, often after they have become independent.

Each child and young person is helped to undertake a wide range of stimulating social and recreational activities in their local communities, which complement their formal education. Many experience foreign holidays for the first time as carers seek to expand their horizons as much as possible. One couple reported, 'we've been arranging magical events for our foster children – raising their expectations'. The agency also provides a number of events throughout the year to which all households are invited. Such events facilitate the wide-ranging needs of children and young people, including those with mobility disabilities. These are important, celebratory social opportunities for foster children and for the children of foster carers at which their skills and ambitions are raised. The vast majority of school age children and young people attend education regularly, and all those above school age are engaged in further education, training or employment.

Both children and young people and carers are encouraged to be aspirational, for example through links with local universities. Attainments and achievements at all

levels are acknowledged. Academic achievements overall are above the national average for looked after children and are improving. Carers have immediate access to expert educational advice. In addition, most children and young people make substantial progress from their starting points, for example by moving from special school to mainstream school or by gaining enough self-confidence from personal tuition to achieve more in school. Children and young people keep records, including photographs, of their experiences and carers undertake prescribed life-story work so they understand their backgrounds. This is supplemented well in all cases by on-going family contact, as defined by their social workers.

## Quality of service

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

The quality of service provided to carers is outstanding. Surveys of all households by Ofsted and also by the agency show almost complete satisfaction. This is a remarkable achievement that has also been maintained over time and occurred in the context of on-going changes to the service. This was summarised by one carer: 'Excellent; supervising social worker and further support and advice given by the head office are fantastic!' Carers receive as much support as required so they can concentrate on caring for the children and young people. Individual children and young people's needs are continually reviewed in line with their care plans to ensure that carers are being as proactive as possible. This means that external pressures on carers are minimised and difficulties, such as those with official bodies, are addressed by supervising social workers. Carers appreciate the fact that in meetings and at other sensitive times they have the immediate and direct support of their supervising social workers. Similarly, they appreciate the fact that their own children are routinely consulted, invited to events and asked to participate. Equally significant is that carers also feel they can contact any member of the administrative or managerial staff for a similarly high level of support. In all cases there remains a clear focus on meeting the needs of children and young people, for example by clarifying care plans, challenging decisions that conflict with children's views, and ensuring that siblings are treated as individuals.

All households receive monthly supervisory visits, which includes both carers wherever appropriate. Such visits are supplemented by phone calls and support meetings. Support is also adapted to meet specific needs, such as for Black carers; groups for male carers have started recently. One carer said, 'We have regular meetings where we always receive insightful advice'. Local duty supervising social workers are always available and also out-of-hours but most carers find that their own worker is readily available. One self-employed worker said, 'This is the best agency I have worked with. Any serious concerns are accepted and addressed; they support my professional views entirely; it's amazing! There is a depth and drive to do a good job.'

The vast majority of carers experience positive assessments. Their views include the following: 'we were made to feel like a very welcome addition to the team'; 'very informative, relaxed, convenient'. After they make contact with the agency, they are

contacted extremely promptly by support workers who then remain as a valuable additional link during and also after the assessments. Assessors are mostly independent. They are rigorously trained and their work is monitored at several stages; any shortfalls in quality are addressed firmly. This means that despite high levels of assessments, only suitable assessments are presented to panel; carers remain thoroughly engaged in the process and usually reach panel in a timely way. New applicants are helped to understand fostering and decide for themselves whether or not fostering will suit them. The agency is actively exploring undertaking research with a local authority regarding recruitment from particular socio-economic and cultural groups. This demonstrates excellent leadership. Such ventures promote and encourage good practice within the service and also in the profession more widely. Successful applicants are resoundingly positive about the applicability of the initial training they receive too.

Approved carers receive regular training, which, they confirm, readily prepares them for the challenges posed by foster children and young people. Children and young people are engaged in the planning and presentation of training and carers who have special skills are encouraged to lead training events. These imaginative steps help to ensure that all parts of the agency are involved in its success. The thorough training programme is kept under review and improvements are on-going as the agency seeks to implement lessons from research, from mistakes and from children and young people. National induction standards for foster carers are routinely completed within the prescribed timescale, which is substantially more successful than most other independent fostering agencies. Supervising social workers ensure that carers plan their individual development programmes. As a result all carers are engaged in and stimulated by on-going professional improvement. However, there is some lack of clarity about what constitutes 'core' training in the first year or two of carers' approval. Given the high level of training overall and the way in which this is routinely supplemented by supervising social workers during their visits, this developmental issue has minimal negative impact.

All parties confirm that the agency matches children and young people, including sibling groups, to foster families particularly effectively. This is based on effective recruitment and is demonstrated by the lower than average rate of unplanned endings, appropriate management of households with more than three foster children, and the successful relationships that are established between carers and children. Recruitment is successfully achieved from all parts of the community because of the agency's clear anti-discriminatory stance. Thorough consideration is given to any inter-racial placements and a supervising social worker has special expertise in working with sanctuary-seeking children. All placements are routinely monitored against the agreed care plan targets, which is central to the work that carers and supervising social workers undertake. Any difficulties in placements are also monitored centrally. Disruptions are reviewed promptly with other professionals in order to stabilise them wherever possible. In rare cases, unplanned endings are undertaken in a measured and child-friendly way that emphasises to children and carers the progress that was made. In all cases, the agency seeks to learn, with input from the children and young people involved, how the difficulties arose and recommendations are made for future practice.

The agency's panel also considers any shortfalls and provides a rigorous element of quality assurance, for example by challenging assessors, meeting with senior managers and by members completing evaluation forms. Panel and decision making processes are organised very well and occur in a timely way. Panel meetings are also used imaginatively to educate staff who attend to observe part of a meeting. The consideration of initial assessments always uses questions drafted by children and young people themselves. Applicants receive information about panel and photographs of panel members prior to attending meetings so they are thoroughly prepared; this also helps prevent any conflicts of interest. High standards are also demonstrated by the production of an annual report specifically about panel activities. Panel members have a specific induction programme and also attend joint training, which means they are familiar with procedures and individuals. Recent improvements have been made to the annual appraisal process as a result of feedback and other developments are under review, including to foster carers' annual reviews.

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

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

All the children and young people who completed surveys or who commented in person feel safe in their placements. This is a significant achievement in a large agency and reflects extremely positively on the leadership, matching and training that is provided. Carers are well trained and are justifiably confident about identifying any child protection issues; their competence is confirmed by external professionals. Incidents such as bullying, allegations and children going missing are successfully minimised. Any such issues are identified early and are carefully monitored. Lessons are applied so that, for example, recurring false allegations do not adversely affect carers. The frequency of unannounced visits to carers has been increased to improve this method of assessing the quality and safety of the care provided to children and young people.

All staff work effectively with other agencies and recent improvements arising from national debates have drawn attention to the risks to children and young people of sexual exploitation. A member of staff is specifically qualified to train staff and foster carers on the issues involved and he also works directly with young people who are at risk. The agency encourages an atmosphere of openness and trust, which is understood and praised by carers and children. Children and young people are effectively taught to raise concerns and usually know several adults who they can contact; one described the agency as a whole as 'amazingly supportive'.

The agency clearly learns from significant incidents, whether they be complaints, allegations or other events, and they have a direct effect on practice. An extensive range of meaningful improvements have arisen from this process, including: the compilation of a new child exploitation policy and associated training; seeing birth children as well as foster children alone to obtain their views; risk assessing new



applicants as well as undertaking checks; devising a new induction programme for new carers; reviewing the respite care policy to improve its attention to children and young people's needs; initiating a children's council, and, drafting a periodic magazine for teenagers to supplement the one for younger children. These ideas, and others, are reflected in the development plan for next year.

## **Leadership and management**

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

Highly effective leadership is a highlight of the service. This arises principally from the Registered Manager, but is reflected consistently at all levels of the agency. This is a substantial achievement, especially during a period of growth and change, and contributes to the engagingly positive atmosphere and drive to improve. Individuals throughout the service, especially children and young people, are helped to do as well as they can. Participation is continually facilitated, including through major events such as celebrating Black history or promoting children's rights. Significantly, the vast majority of children and young people who responded felt able to comment on the agency as a whole and overwhelmingly felt it does a good job. The manager ensures that the service remains viable and that excellent relationships are maintained with other agencies that are contacted about notifiable incidents; carers described no problems at all with the payment of their fees and allowances.

There is a clear and extensive framework for monitoring the agency, which is regularly improved. This includes wide-ranging consultation exercises in which all parties are involved. Each team within the agency, for example, contributes their own plan for improvement and its effectiveness is closely audited. Files are regularly checked and monthly reports are compiled of the issues listed in regulations. Monitoring has been improved recently by the introduction of a new method of assessing children and young people's progress that contributes to centralised data. This assists senior staff in identifying patterns and trends and more improvements are underway. Consistency of practice is ensured despite the challenges posed by home working and geographical spread.

Resources are proactively invested in the pursuit of new initiatives. These include those arising from government policies (such as the Foster Carers' Charter, adapted for local use), from professional bodies and from other partners, such as local authorities, as described above. This promotes excellent practice within the agency and elsewhere and gives it a strong reputation within the profession. One hundred per cent of social workers who responded to the Ofsted survey said they would recommend the service to colleagues.

In the same way that carers are supported to undertake their role effectively, staff are equally well supported. All staff experience closely timetabled induction training, supervision and appraisals with clear objectives. Further training is discussed at each supervision meeting and professional development is emphasised, in line with any observations from children and carers. Work is underway to further improve the

methods of obtaining the views of children and young people about supervising social workers. Supervising social workers have manageable caseloads, which allow reflective practice to occur. A supervising social worker reported, 'I have never been refused a training opportunity and my own development in the role is very important to the company'. Supervising social workers have developed their skills by contributing to carer training as well as undertaking specialist roles, such as attending panel meetings, or supporting projects. Their own supervision meetings always pay particular attention to the individual needs of carers, children and young people to ensure that momentum is maintained.

## 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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.