

Fostering North East

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Smith
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Fostering North East is an independent fostering agency based in Newcastle upon Tyne. It is operated by St Cuthbert's Care which is a registered charity. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people on a long and short-term basis. It also offers short-break fostering for children with disabilities.

The agency comprises the manager, one senior and two supervising social workers and an administrative assistant. It also employs two sessional workers who support direct work with young people and foster carer reviews. The agency has around 24 young people placed with 23 fostering families.

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.**

This is a good fostering service. It works well with local authorities to make good and well matched placements for children with its foster carers. Carers are provided with very high levels of support. This helps to ensure that young people make good progress and enjoy a positive experience of foster care. The agency's social workers know young people well. They closely monitor placements and support children and their carers. This helps ensure they receive the support they need and are safe and well with their foster carers. Young people feel safe and well cared for.

Young people make good progress. They take part in a range of activities which help

them to engage with other people, learn skills and develop relationships. Their health needs are met well so their health improves. Their educational achievement is good when compared to their starting point at placement. Where contact with families is appropriate for young people, they receive good support to help ensure this is a positive experience for them.

The agency is well managed. It has enough staff who are well supervised and have access to appropriate training. The manager and staff team work closely with placing authority commissioners and social workers and this helps ensure that young people live in stable placements and receive the support they need. The Registered Manager and the directors of the agency give close oversight to its operation and the quality of its work. This helps ensure that the care delivered to young people is consistently good. The fostering panel provides an appropriate quality check for the agency's work. It makes clear recommendations although it does not specifically cite the reasons for these. This means that the agency's decision maker does not have all the information she should regarding panel's reasoning.

Foster carers are well trained and very well supported. Most assessments are thorough, evaluative and provide an accurate view of the competence, attitudes and suitability of the applicants to foster children. However, where applicants' backgrounds or history are more complex, assessments do not always do enough to independently verify information given by the applicant's themselves. Additionally, not every annual review of a foster carer is sufficiently rigorous. These factors mean that the suitability of some foster carers is not always fully assured

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
28: Reviews and terminations of approval	must, when undertaking a review of a foster parent, seek and take account of the views of any placing authority which has, within the preceding year, placed a child with the foster parent. (The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 Regulation 28(3)(b)(iii))	23 July 2015

*These requirements are subject to a statutory requirement notice.

Recommendations

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

- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker need in order to make an objective approval decision. Specifically, that suitability checks on applicants' backgrounds are fully completed and verified (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about its carers' ongoing suitability to foster. Specifically, that full information about every young person placed with the carer in the review period is included and considered. (NMS 13.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Young people make good progress, achieve positive outcomes and have positive experiences during their time in foster care.

The agency works closely with local authorities when placements are requested and made. It carefully matches young people with their prospective foster carers and makes sure that moves to their new homes are well managed and supported. Moves are well planned where possible and, where this is not the case, good information sharing and placement agreement meetings help ensure placements are well supported.

Young people receive very high levels of support in their placements. They make secure attachments to their foster carers and are helped to develop positive friendships and relationships. One young person said about her foster home and carer, 'This is my home; we get on well.' The agency's social work and support staff spend time with young people getting to know them, seeking their views and helping them resolve any difficulties they are experiencing. This helps young people to enjoy stable family lives and make good progress. For example, one young person said that a supervising social worker 'is always there for us and always helps us'. Placement stability is good with a significant proportion of short term placements becoming matched on a long term basis. In situations when a local authority plans to move a young person against their wishes, the agency challenges this strongly and successfully, involving advocacy services if necessary.

The agency's staff listen to young people and ensure their voices are heard about their care and plans. Staff spend time with young people individually as well as at the 'Young Stars' group which takes place while foster carers are undertaking training. Young people take part in a range of activities. This helps to cement

relationships between them and agency workers. It also allows the agency to understand their situations and views. Their lives are enhanced by their access to a range of leisure and recreational activities which help them to develop their skills and to increase their self-esteem. They are fully involved in the family life and activities of their foster carers.

Young people have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. Their carers and the agency advocate strongly on young people's behalf in situations where specialist support such as including children's mental health services is not readily available. They also make good progress with their education. School moves and exclusions are rare and young people's school achievement and success improves.

Young people not only make progress after moving to their carers but continue to do so in long term placements. For example, after a short time in foster care a psychologist recorded being 'astounded' at the progress made by one young person. A social worker said of a long term placement that care meets 'the very high standards needed to meet the child's specific high level of dependency needs over the duration of child placement of 4 years.'

The agency's staff and foster carers help young people to maintain important family ties. Foster carers work well with birth families where this is required. They help young people to maintain contact with family members wherever this is assessed as appropriate and support them to maintain good relationships.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good.**

The agency understands the nature of the young people it may be asked to provide foster placements for. Its recruitment activity is based on this knowledge and enquirers are provided with good information about fostering. This means that people who apply to be assessed as a foster carer are clear about the age and needs of the young people likely to be placed with them in the future.

The agency screens enquirers carefully before applications are invited. Once an application is made, assessments are carried out in a timely manner and provide a clear evaluation of the applicant's capability, competence and attitude towards fostering. Training is good throughout this process which means that when approved, foster carers are well prepared for what fostering entails and the challenges they will face. The majority of assessments are rigorous and robust in checking applicants' suitability to foster vulnerable children. However, in some, more complex cases this is not done as thoroughly as it should be.

The agency's panel works effectively and provides a good scrutiny of the cases presented to it. It challenges the agency where necessary. For example, panel recently deferred making a recommendation on a case as it considered that further verification of some information was required. This provides a suitable check on the

quality of the agency's practice. Panel minutes provide the agency decision maker with a clear recommendation but do not record the reasons the panel came to this recommendation. This means that the agency's decision maker does not have a full understanding of panel's reasoning when she makes her decision.

The agency provides foster carers with very good and regular supervision. This helps to ensure that young people are provided with high levels of support and make good progress. The support provided to foster carers is excellent. Carers comments about support included, 'the support is second to none, there is always someone to help or give advice' and that 'full 100% support and back up in all aspects of fostering' is provided. Foster carers know their supervising social workers and other team members well. They have professional and trusting relationships with them which focus on the well-being of young people. Out of hours support is effective and managed in a consistent manner by the agency's social workers and manager. Foster carers' reviews are generally thorough. The agency ensures that young people are fully consulted and their opinions taken into account for the reviews of their carers. Support workers spend time working directly with young people prior to these reviews to ensure that young people's experience is central to this process.

The agency offers a wide range of training to its foster carers. This training is provided in house or accessed from external providers and is of a high quality. Training includes mandatory topics including safeguarding and behaviour management. It also includes individualised training including resilience and trauma and child sexual exploitation based on the needs of carers or the young people they foster. The provision of training is managed creatively including the provision of young people's activities during the event. Consequently attendance at training is good. All carers approved for over twelve months have attained the Training, Support and Development Standards. This good quality training helps ensure that carers are able to provide young people a high quality of care that meets their needs.

The agency's social workers meet young people regularly. This helps to ensure that their needs are being met and to provide any support they need. The agency supports foster carers to advocate for the young person in placement and to be a full part of the team working with the young person. For example, one carer described how persistently one social worker had been in working to resolve an issue at a young person's school.

The agency works effectively with placing authorities to make and support good and placements. Delegated consent arrangements are identified when placements are made and the agency persists in gaining full information from the local authority where this is not forthcoming.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency works well with placing authorities to place young people with foster carers in as planned a manner as is possible. The agency only offers potential placements to local authorities with families who are as well matched as possible to the needs of the young person.

The agency devises clear risk assessments regarding each young person placed and supports this further with good safe caring plans. Both of these documents are developed and reviewed over time to take account of additional information and to ensure they remain relevant. The agency provides foster carers with both pre and post approval training about working with young people who may have been abused or who may be at additional risk of harm. This helps carers to look after young people in a way that promotes their safety but also allows them to take age appropriate risks. Supervising social works liaise effectively with their local authority counterparts to share information and monitor the placement. When safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur, the agency responds to these promptly in line with the local authority's procedures to ensure that young people are safe.

The good relationships between supervising social workers and young people mean that young people are able to express their views and raise any concerns they have. These are taken seriously and the agency takes any action necessary based on children's views.

Young people rarely go missing from foster care. In situations in which young people do leave their foster home without authority the agency and its foster carers respond to this appropriately. Any additional risks to the young person are identified and clear action taken based on the young person's needs. The agency works closely with the local authority and other services to help address this risk taking behaviour. Only one young person has gone missing in the last two years. This young person, who had a history of going missing before being placed through this agency, has received psychological support and access to advocacy and the agency has worked closely with the police. This has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of incidents and the risks involved.

Recruitment process for the staff and members of the central panel list are robust and thorough. However, this is not uniformly the case for the assessment of foster carers. Fostering assessments provide a clear analysis of the applicant's aptitude for fostering but are not always sufficiently robust in assessing suitability. Most assessments are of good quality but in cases where the applicant's backgrounds or histories are more complex these matters are not always explored well enough. One assessment did not do enough to get independent verification regarding the situation around an applicant's historic suspension from a position working with vulnerable adults. Another assessment failed to undertake an overseas criminal records check on applicants who had lived abroad for a time. Positively panel identified the first of these issues and deferred its recommendation but not the second. This means that the suitability of some foster carers has not been fully ascertained.

Foster placements are monitored closely and foster carers' supervision and reviews monitor young people's safety and wellbeing. However, reviews do not always fully capture and consider all key information about events over the last year. In one case, a review meeting did not include information about a placement of siblings with

the carer within the review period. Although this placement was brief it was not recorded in the documentation nor considered at the review. This means that potential key information, including input from the placing authority about the placement, the carers or the agency, was not sought or taken into account.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that the care delivered meets young people's needs. It communicates effectively with them to share key information and to address any difficulties that young people face. The agency provides an appropriate and positive challenge to local authorities where this is necessary to ensure young people receive the support they need.

The agency's good monitoring and excellent support for placements ensures that young people receive good care. The agency tracks young people's progress and works with carers to provide additional input where necessary. The agency works well with other services to access any additional therapeutic or specialist support young people may need.

The agency has recently appointed an administrator. This is improving the effectiveness of the agency's administrative systems. Social work staffing levels are appropriate for the size of the agency. They are an experienced team of practitioners and have manageable caseloads. They have access to good levels of training and support. This means they are able to monitor and support foster carers and young people well and develop very positive and supportive relationships with them.

The agency is well managed at a strategic and operational level. The manager's monitoring of the agency's practice is effective and this is replicated by the close oversight and monitoring carried out by the organisations board.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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. inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.