

The Foster Care Co-operative Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC036963
Inspection date 09/11/2015
Inspector Dawn Bennett
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

Setting address The Foster Care Co-operative, Penny Hall, The Haysfield, Malvern, Worcestershire, WR14 1GF

Telephone number 01684 892380
Email duty@fostercarecooperative.co.uk
Registered person The Foster Care Co-operative Limited
Registered manager Ms Anne Bard
Responsible individual Mr Ian Brazier
Date of last inspection 03/11/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Foster care co-operative is a none profitable organisation which operates across England and Wales. The office is based in Malvern, Worcestershire. It provides short-term, long-term, staying put, sibling groups, short breaks and parent and child fostering placements. On November 9th 2015 there were 66 children and young people in placement. On that date the agency had 55 fostering households, of which six were approved between April 1st 2014 and March 31st 2015.

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 agency is a good service overall. It has strengths in many areas. Of particular note is the agency's sustained placement stability with an average placement being over three years. The majority of children and young people lead happy, stable lives and build positive and secure attachments. Their experiences, progress and outcomes are on the whole positive with particularly good focus on education and participation. The majority of children and young people achieve over and above what was expected of them academically and socially. A young person said: 'The support my brother received from our carers has resulted in him going to university. After visiting him there I think going to university is something I would like to experience too.'

Foster carers speak highly of the service and are proud of the children and young people in their care. They feel a key strength is the supervising social workers. Foster carer's said: 'They are always available night and day.' 'They listen patiently, always have good insight and give valuable advice.' 'They are very experienced and well qualified. They give you realistic advice giving good consideration to your own, your family's and the children's

needs.'

There is good quality reflective practice and established quality assurance systems at every level throughout the agency which promote the safety and well-being of children and young people. However, in a small number of cases, recording is not transparent. For example, records do not clearly identify actions taken to explore and reduce risk. The registered manager's quality assurance review of safeguarding arrangements is not developed enough to identify and address these shortfalls.

The management team continue to develop the service. They effectively use feedback from staff, foster carers, children and young people and partner agencies to inform their business plan. Partnership work is very positive and ensures children and young people receive the support they need to progress. Placing authorities acknowledge and value the good quality of foster placements and the positive achievements of children and young people.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure panel provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented (NMS 14.2)
- ensure foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings (NMS 21.8)
- ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This specifically relates to risk assessments identifying actions to be taken to reduce risks and being up dated in a timely manner to reflect any new information or decisions (NMS 4.5)
- ensure where gaps are identified, specifically in records, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)
- ensure where a child goes missing the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and the responsible authority to consider the reasons for their going missing. The fostering service considers with the responsible authority and foster carer what action should be taken to prevent the child going missing in future. Any concerns arising about the foster carer or the placement are addressed, as far as is possible, in conjunction with the responsible authority (NMS 5.9)
- ensure the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. This specifically relates to developing the

monitoring of safeguarding matters (MNS 25.2)

- ensure staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision by appropriate qualified and experienced staff. This specifically relates to ensuring records of supervisions record key discussions and decisions. (NMS 24.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Most children and young people experience positive introductions to foster families and good placement stability. They form meaningful relationships which are sustained on into adulthood. This has a positive impact on their sense of security, belonging and general well-being. They have a good sense of personal identity. Their religious and cultural needs are identified and met. They experience a wide range of positive opportunities to develop and have fun. They are part of family life. They go on holiday with their foster carers. They are also encouraged to develop their own interests such as sporting activities, Cadets, music and performing arts. The whole agency knows about and celebrates individual children's and young people's achievements. From achieving a yellow belt in Taekwondo and representing Great Britain in competitions, playing Grandma in a production of Billy Eliot or being scouted by professional football teams.

Children and young people maintain family links and sustain relationships which are important to them. Foster carers are skilled in helping them understand their past and develop their own identity. They promote the birth family and proactively facilitate contact. Children and young people have positive friendships and are active within their local communities. One young person has achieved the Birmingham Golden Star award for charitable work. Socialising and participation is also promoted by the agency through events and competitions. These are well received and provide opportunities for meeting with other foster and birth children. One such event is the short story competition for foster and birth children. Entries are judged by a children's author and published in a book. Some children and young people also actively contribute to community based forums. They represent children's and young people's views at safeguarding board meetings and local authority meetings.

Children and young people are healthy and lead healthy lifestyles. Foster carer's successfully re-engaging children and young people with health professionals and ensure any developmental delays or behavioural concerns are quickly identified and addressed. Healthy routines are established that ensure good focus is given to diet, sleep, exercise, behaviour, emotional well-being and education. A stakeholder said: 'The foster carer has stuck with the young person through very troubling times. She has given her, for the first time in her life, positive standards in personal hygiene and education. She has instilled some very good values. This is giving this young person the chance to become a positive well-functioning adult.'

Children and young people achieve excellent educational outcomes. They have outstanding school attendance, with many attaining 100%. All have appropriate educational placements, and the majority achieve above expectations as they settle and engage. The agency is proud to have a 100% four year consecutive record of all young people moving on from school to further education or employment. In August 2015, four year 13s (100% of the cohort) gained qualifications to secure places at university and three of them (75%) have consequently gone on to start their degree courses, which include marketing, business studies and sports coaching with one of

the cohort deferring her place at university until September 2016. Foster carers and children and young people are proud of their educational outcomes. There is excellent recognition of young people receiving school awards for 'pupil who made the best start in year 4', 'head teacher's award' for excellent work, 'most improved student' and achieving the Duke of Edinburgh bronze award.

Children and young people learn skills that help prepare them for adulthood. They take on responsibilities at school and in their local community. One young person was selected as a senior school prefect, and after going through an interview process, was given the job of part-time school librarian. Another young person stated: 'My foster carer is my life. She helps me with all my issues. I am in my last year at school and think I would like to be a mechanic. I have a Saturday job at a local garage which I am really enjoying. I have made new friends working there.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The process for preparing, assessing and approving foster carers is well established and timely. Recruitment was slow in 2014 but has increased through 2015. As a result, the number of assessments have been low. Most have been of a good quality. They are analytical and focus on the competencies required to be a foster carer. The support and supervision of foster carers throughout this process and once approved is child focused. Foster carers also receive on-going specialist training alongside agency staff. This includes training and consultation with clinical psychotherapists who specialise in attachment based theory. They complete the training, support and development standards within timescales. They also access additional training and information sessions through support groups. These training sessions are regularly reviewed and developed by the agency using foster carer's feedback. Carers understand and value these processes and mechanisms. They feel supervising social workers provide excellent support. As a result, the agency provides placements which mainly meet the needs of children and young people with a range of complex requirements.

Foster carers are pleased they have chosen foster care co-operative. They 'like the ethos and the fact that they are a not for profit agency' and 'feel valued members of a team.' They feel children and young people benefit from the additional expert advice they receive from a number of specialist staff including an educational advisor, transitions advisor, placement co-ordinator and recruitment officer. They feel their knowledge is also enhanced by leads on mental health, healthy lifestyles and e-safety from within the supervising social work team. As a result, foster carers practice is well informed by current research and practice. Social workers speak highly of the quality of foster carers. One social worker stated: 'As foster carers I would rate them as exceptionally strong. Right up the top with regard to foster carers. Their level of insight is excellent. They have a real depth of understanding with regard to the needs of the young people placed. The male carer has made himself very knowledgeable on foetal alcohol syndrome. He now offers insight into

this condition to us as a local authority but also to his peers.'

Most matching results in sustained placements that are successful in meeting the needs of children and young people. There is a clear process which the placement co-ordinator follows and which actively involves supervising social workers and foster carers. Social workers of children already in placement are always consulted. The agency obtains further information from local authorities prior to making a placement decision, where this is necessary. Foster carers stated: 'We don't rush into placements and the agency don't force us to. We take all the time we need to consider and think about how we can meet the needs of the child, with the input of our SSW.' Foster carers and their families are very inclusive and committed to the children and young people who live with them. They are non-judgemental when working with families and develop professional relationships that ensure young people maintain and improve relationships. Respite care is not encouraged and is only supported if it is needed to sustain a placement.

The fostering panel is well established and continues to review its practice to ensure it makes balanced, well-informed decisions. Panel members have a good range of personal and professional experiences, with backgrounds in health, education, social work, providing foster care and personal experience of being in care. On the whole they add rigour to the process but there are occasions when challenge to the agency's assessment process is not evidenced in records and therefore does not support the agency to maintain and develop practice.

Supervising social workers, foster carers and specialist staff ensure all children and young people's plans are regularly monitored and reviewed. Foster carers report that the support they receive from agency staff in meetings is another key strength. This promotes children and young people's needs and ensures effective advocacy on their behalf. Social workers and independent reviewing officers commend the expert knowledge supervising social workers have with regard to the children and young people. Delegated authority is clear and an area which is chased up where necessary.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Children and young people's safety and well-being is prioritised and promoted. Their views are valued and they influence their opportunities and outcomes.

They are enabled to take age-appropriate risks, according to their individual circumstances and needs. As a result, most children and young people become independent, confident and resilient individuals.

The management team monitor unplanned endings of placements and have identified some patterns with young people going missing from care. There have equally some very successful placements where foster carers have supported people to stabilise and significantly reduce high risk behaviours. In response to the needs of

these children and young people the agency's management team have run specialist training for staff and foster carers.

Foster carers and supervising social workers understand each child and young person's assessed needs well. However, where children and young people have more complex risks such as self-harm, child sexual exploitation, safe use of the internet or going missing from care, paperwork is not consistently robust and does not reflect this knowledge. It does not clearly evidence decision making processes. Matching, risk management plans, family safe caring plans and supervision records do not identify all risks or the actions foster carers should take to reduce risks. In some cases records are not up dated quickly after events or meetings to reflect new risks and alternative strategies. Records also do not identify any lessons learnt. For example, local authority return interviews after missing from care events are not recorded. This potentially leaves foster carers and young people vulnerable.

The agency provides a range of training to staff and carers to further their understanding of attachment and how children and young people's previous life experiences affect their behaviour and safety. These are run on a regular basis and are valued by the foster carers and staff. The agency continues to develop this training. It also runs information sharing days for children and young people to help them learn how to protect themselves and keep themselves safe. For example, they have recently piloted an e-safety day for a small group of young people.

Allegations, complaints and disclosures about possible abuse or harm are referred immediately to local authority child protection services. Foster carers and staff attend training and know how to respond to safeguarding allegations, risks from child sexual exploitation, children who go missing from care and radicalisation. Allegations against carers are dealt with appropriately and carers are given independent support while an investigation takes place. The agency has a clear understanding of the role of the local authority designated officer. There are good partnership relationships with local authority's and the police to minimise risks and reduce incidents. Children and young people know who they can talk to about their concerns and worries.

Staff, panel members and foster carers are recruited using robust procedures to ensure they are safe and suitable people to work with and have access to children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Recruitment of foster carers had slowed in 2014. The appointment of a recruitments officer and a new recruitment drive has seen a big increase in interest and assessments. This will continue to enable the agency to ensure children and young people are placed in appropriate and local foster placements. The agency has effective working relationships with partner agencies. Commissioners, social workers and independent reviewing officers speak highly of the service. The registered manager and responsible individual have a clear understanding of the requirements of local authorities. As a result, the agency is giving good focus to the sufficiency and expertise of foster carers.

The management team are child focused. The agency's policies, procedures and systems ensure staff know the children and young people in placement very well and have a good understanding of the progress they are making. Supervising social workers undertake assessments of foster carers and then continue to support them once approved. This means they are able to form insightful relationships with the foster carers, their family and the children and young people placed with them. They regularly monitor foster carer's development, birth children's well-being and children and young people's progress.

The quality of the service is monitored on a regular basis and is used to improve the service. The management team actively meet with carers, staff, children and young people. Children and young people contribute and make a difference to the service and care they receive. This is a priority for the agency as a whole. All children and young people have access to the agency's 'Kidzrep' through a dedicated webpage and helpline facility. They are also asked their views through surveys, foster carer reviews, their own reviews and through children's events. The registered manager undertakes quarterly internal monitoring which is informed by regular quality assurance meetings. The safeguarding element of this process is not as detailed or as rigorous as other headline areas such as education and contribution. This means the registered manager does not have as detailed and operational overview of patterns and trends of safeguarding practice.

The statement of purpose and children's guide are clearly written and provide a good understanding of the service to those who read them. The Foster Carers' Charter is easily accessible on the website and reflects the service offered. Carers feel they can express their opinions and the agency responds positively to them. Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Morale is high and staff are invested in the agency. It is well staffed, resourced and financially viable. The strengths and abilities of the staff group are key to the good progress and outcomes being achieved by children and young people.

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.