

UK Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

UK Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency. It is privately owned and aims to provide children with high quality, emergency, short- and long-term placements as well as parent and child placements.

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**.

This agency was registered fifteen months. The ethos of the agency is that no one has the 'right to foster' and only those people with the right 'attitude' to fostering will be considered and approved. This commences at the point of enquiry to become a foster carer. The agency operates across a wide geographical area and provides a diverse selection of placement options.

The agency has an extremely effective matching process. Placement stability is exceptional and there have been no unplanned endings in the fifteen months since the agency has started. Foster carers receive excellent support and specialist therapeutic guidance is available to address any difficulties that a child or young person might experience. The stability of the placements helps young people to build resilience and this leads to very positive outcomes for children and young people.

Robust recruitment processes ensures that only those with the right attitude and

those persons who subscribe to the agency's child-centred approach are recruited as foster carers with this agency. The quality of written assessments of foster carers is of an extremely high standard. The assessments are accurate, focused and analytical. Assessments are completed within timescales. The reports focus on the potential carer's ability to demonstrate an understanding of resilience and how they can help children develop their own self-view. Potential foster carer's accounts of their upbringing are reflective in delivery and insightful in their interpretation of inter-familial relationships and how these have influenced themselves as individuals.

Foster carers see themselves as integral to the agency and part of the team around the child. They advocate in the best interest of the child. Foster carers show a strong commitment to their role within the agency. The agency ensures that partnership working with local authority, social workers, schools, and health professionals are effective. This helps to positively contribute to the children and young people's experiences, progression and outcomes.

The agency completed a programme of consultation with the children and young people which was developed and run by a care leaver. The overall process also sought the views of the foster carers and social workers. All learning points and concerns were acted upon. Feedback is also received from children and young people via their monthly reports as well as the annual review of the foster carer.

Outcomes for children and young people are monitored and recorded. Where foster carers and supervising social workers identify that outcomes are not progressing or achieved, additional support is provided. The management has ensured that staff and foster carers recruited by the agency have access to all of the managers. There is a comprehensive induction and training programme for staff and foster carers that ensures that they become familiar with the agency's policies, procedures and working practices. This, as well as an effective quality assurance and monitoring system, has enabled the agency to operate without compromise which ensures the quality of the service provided by the agency is excellent.

The educational progress of all young people is monitored and young people have made significant progress considering their starting points. Foster carers are also successful in assisting young people to address behavioural issues that can put them at risk. The frequency of young people going missing is significantly less than the national average. Children and young people enjoy full, active lives and are participating in a wide range of social and recreational activities which increases their self-confidence and extends their social horizons.

The agency is inclusive and key parties such as the staff, foster carers, children and young people as well as directors and managers contribute to development decisions to take the agency forward. Staff and foster carers are supported to continually examine their practice and consider new ways to improve the experiences of the children and young people. The agency is participation in a range of initiatives and research that can have a positive impact on the outcomes for looked after children and young people.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people are involved in the placement process and receive child-friendly profiles of their prospective carers in advance of any placement. One foster carer has made a very child-friendly video of the family and the house so a child or young person can have a real time view of the home. This helps children and young people to settle into the home and have an understanding of how their foster carers will look after them. Wherever possible, children and young people are able to visit the foster placement beforehand. Foster carers consult with social workers, previous carers and in some instances parents to acquire some key information that will help the child or young person to settle into the placement.

Children and young people are central to fostering family life. They feel safe and at ease living within the family. This is promoted by clear care planning arrangements, which ensure that foster carers are supported to make day-to-day decisions for the children and young people they care for. This helps children and young people to have confidence in these relationships they form with their fostering family. This in turn supports the development of trusting and secure attachments to their foster carers. Young people comment, 'I love living here, I have had many placements before, this is the best.'

Children and young people are expected to live full and active lives and there is an expectation that all young people are engaged in extra-curricular activities. All of the children and young people currently in placement with this agency are engaged in social and recreational activities within their local communities. Recent initiatives have included fitness training, boxing, and bike riding. The participation by children and young people in such activities widens their social horizons, boosts their self-confidence and provides opportunities to have fun and to develop or be more aware of their own identity. They see their brothers and sisters and foster carers fully support this. Any issues arising are handled sensitively by foster carers enabling them to develop emotional resilience, knowledge and understanding of their background. Children and young people's access to the agency's records will be provided where appropriate and agreed. This is in line with the agency's policy.

Children's and young people's rights are promoted through various consultation methods, which provide feedback and advice to the management team for developing the service. For example, young people have influenced change in the children's guide, and the recruitment process. Furthermore, the participation worker ensures that all young people understand their right to complain if they are unhappy, concerned or bullied. Opportunities are provided to see children and young people alone to ensure that any ideas for change and improvement are identified and addressed. Consequently, the voice of the child is well embedded. A stakeholder commented that at the tendering process, this was 'the only agency with a care leaver as part of their team.'

Children and young people live in stable and well matched placements, which provide

a solid foundation for their progress and the positive outcomes. The progress of each child and young person is measured and charted against their goals and is reflected in detailed monthly reports. Where children or young people are not progressing, these plans are reviewed and the agency puts in place additional identified support to address the areas of concern. This includes therapeutic support and guidance, life story work, play therapy from a behaviour consultant, and mentors from youth offending or education. This results in positive outcomes for children and young people that, in many instances, include a decrease in young people taking part in offending and other self-destructive behaviours.

Children and young people are supported to lead a healthy life. Signed parental consent forms for medical treatment are available ensuring that children get the treatment they need when they need it. They live in a healthy environment where their physical, emotional and social well-being is promoted. They engage in physical and social activities and have easy access to health care services to meet their individual needs. Specialist health care is sought to address young people's needs correctly. Young people are encouraged to pursue their individual interests and foster carers and the agency are active in ensuring these are fulfilled. These practices make sure young people enjoy good health.

All children and young people are engaged in some form of education or training. Children and young people are making positive strides to maximise their potential. For example, children and young people have exceeded their educational targets considering their starting points. This is helped by the fact that children and young people understand and appreciate the stability of their placements. As a result young people's risk taking behaviours have significantly reduced and they now have peer friendships and social lives. The agency supports and encourages foster carers to make every effort to access resources and services that will provide better educational outcomes for those in their care. The agency prepares an education report on each child in placement. The report focuses on the current status of the child's education, and measures and quantifies the progress made since the start of the placement. The report is used to identify and highlight areas of strength and areas for development. The findings are fed back into the care planning in order to access additional educational resources. In spite of poor educational histories, the majority of children and young people make significant progress in their education once they are settled.

Children and young people feel very much a part of the fostering family and enjoy themselves. Foster carers help children and young people to maintain contact with their families and have had some success in helping a number re-establish meaningful relationships which has resulted in a child or young person returning home. Respite care is only provided when this is assessed as being in the child's best interest in order to stabilise a placement with a foster carer.

All of the children placed with this agency's foster carers are enjoying very stable placements and the agency aims to ensure that young people stay beyond 18 under their 'staying put' scheme. This means that young people will complete an independence programme where foster carers help young people acquire a range of

knowledge and skills that help them to successfully prepare for moving on to independent living.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency has been successful in recruiting a diverse group of foster carers including those foster carers that specialise in disability, specialist carers who are trained and able to care for children and young people involved in the youth offending system, as well as carers from ethnic minority communities; this is in line with its Statement of Purpose.

The agency has high expectations of its foster carers and only approves carers who demonstrate that they have the right attitude and commitment to care for children and young people and to continually develop their knowledge and skills. The agency always considers the whole fostering family and the context in which care will be offered. The agency is equipped to respond effectively to the increasingly complex needs of the young people being referred. Their holistic approach to the delivery of care takes on board the views of children and young people, foster carers, social workers and therapeutic staff.

The preparation, assessment, the support and training of foster carers is excellent. There is a strong focus on the skills, aptitude and attitude of applicants and their capacity to care safely and responsibly for children and young people. The skills to foster programme has a strong bias to attachment training, safe caring and the stages of child development. Foster carers say that they felt that this was very valuable training that helped to prepare them for the fostering task. One carer said 'It helped me understand how to help the child manage behaviour, build self-esteem, and to develop a sense of belonging.' The impact is that the agency has recruited foster carers who are reliable and consistently understand the needs of children and young people.

On-going training and supervision of foster carers is of a very high standard. All prospective carers have to successfully complete additional training modules, in addition to the skills to foster programme, before being presented to panel. Post approval, foster carers regularly access training in specialist areas such as trauma, internet safety, de-escalation and building resilience and safeguarding. All foster carers are on track to complete the training support and development standards in foster care within one year of their approval. This develops the foster carer's professional skills and practice.

Foster carers were very positive about the quality of support and the frequency of visits. They commented extremely positively about the Registered Manager, the responsible individual and the supervising social workers. They describe the agency as being 'reliable' and can be 'counted on' in a crisis. One carer stated, 'no matter whatever the time of day or night there is always someone available to help.' Foster carers say that they feel as part of the team working to meet the needs of the

children and young people.

The panel is highly effective and promotes high standards and rigorous assessment. The panel list contains members with diverse expertise in key areas including, education, safeguarding, health, youth offending and also a young person who was looked after in the past. Foster carer assessments are generally written to a very high standard. The fostering panel had no complaint about reports. The panel has appropriate access as required to specialists, but generally has sufficient expertise to make well-founded recommendations. It usually operates in a timely manner, and has an appropriate child-centred approach. Foster care feedback forms are very positive. The panel produces an annual report which provides a useful quality assurance function to the agency, particularly in respect of quality of assessments. Training opportunities for panel members are good and panel members generally access these opportunities. The panel is regularly updated on developments within the agency. There are systems in place for the panel and decision maker to discuss issues and resolve differences.

Partnership working is effective and accountability and responsibilities are understood. Foster carers work professionally with the child's social worker within the agreed delegated authority leading to effective day-to-day decision making for the child. Social workers commented very positively about the quality of the care in all cases. Foster carers' homes are welcoming and help the child settle and see themselves as becoming part of the family. Foster carers are fully committed to include the foster child into family life. So in all cases they are included in decision making and participating in home life.

All relevant information at the time of placement is shared with the foster carers. Foster carers are made aware of the vulnerabilities and issues of the children prior to moving into the home so foster carers can make informed decisions about accepting a placement into their home. The agency ensures that foster carers are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours children or young people can exhibit. The agency takes on board research and professional expertise to inform all its working practices.

The agency has developed a specialist programme 'Rethink' to increase the capacity and numbers of foster carers within the sector who will provide foster care for children who have previously or are likely to be involved in criminal activities. All foster carers offering placements work closely with the agency's therapeutic consultants.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Safeguarding underpins all aspects of the agency's policies, procedures and working practices. The agency strives to balance the safety of children and young people with their need to develop and participate in a wide range of age-appropriate activities. Information on how to complain is included in the young people handbook. The

views of children and young people are regularly sought and all are encouraged to raise worries or concerns. All young people are also given a credit sized card that includes various telephone numbers of agencies they can contact in a crisis or if they need to talk or to complain to someone outside of the agency. This includes the number for Ofsted.

Children and young people said they regularly saw the staff from the agency at home visits and felt confident that they would listen and respond to any concerns they raised. No child or young person reported that they were experiencing any form of bullying. Supervising social workers are proactive in supporting children and young people with concerns and will advocate on their behalf with their placing authorities. The agency's quarterly newsletter provides further advice and support for foster carers as well as children and young people and a forum to share thoughts, feeling and seek guidance.

Children and young people are helped to gain a good understanding of risk and to acquire a range of skills to keep themselves safe. Foster carers and staff are aware of their individual responsibilities in regard to reporting any safeguarding issues or concerns to the relevant authorities. All staff and carers undertake mandatory training on all aspects of safeguarding children and young people. All allegations are appropriately investigated. The agency's comprehensive assessment process helps to ensure that children and young people are placed with foster carers with the necessary knowledge and skills to keep them safe.

As part of the matching process the agency considers the risks associated with each child or young person. The composition and needs of individual family members are always considered. Foster carers' homes are subject to regular health and safety checks which ensure environments remain safe. Detailed and specialist pet assessments are also completed. Detailed placement plans provide guidance for foster carers on how the risks associated with each young person's behaviours should be managed. All plans are subject to regular reviews and are updated in response to incidents and changing circumstances. The agency has a record of carers' success in breaking patterns of absconding and anti-social behaviour.

The extensive training provided by the agency equips carers to understand the 'world for the child', the feelings behind their behaviour, decision making, and risk taking behaviour. The result is that those foster carers who specialise in looking after young people who are in trouble with youth offending take challenges in their stride and always see the bigger picture in order to support a more positive future, thus minimising police involvement and avoiding criminalising children and young people unnecessarily.

The agency has in place an assessment process that ensures that only those individuals who have successfully undergone the rigorous assessment process and relevant safeguarding checks are recruited and trained as foster carers. The selection of staff is equally robust and focuses on individuals who are committed and subscribe to the agency's 'child focused' philosophy. The agency's comprehensive vetting systems reduce the likelihood of unsuitable individuals gaining access to the

vulnerable children and young people in their care. The performance of foster carers is monitored on an on-going basis by management and supervising social workers. If any standards of care issues are identified they are immediately addressed.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This is a well-managed agency. Since registration a new responsible individual has been appointed which has further strengthened the team. This agency embodies the provision of a holistic approach to foster care within the context of a positive, inclusive value base. Members of the senior management team all have extensive knowledge and experience of fostering and all play an active role in the daily operation of the agency.

The agency has been extremely adept at harnessing technology to improve communication with foster carers, children and staff. Recent initiatives have included an agency blog about a variety of issues which are relevant to families, parents, foster carers their children and the community. Commissioners expressed that the agency is consistent and appropriate matching of placements provides stability for children and young people, many of whom have experienced multiple placement breakdowns. A stakeholder commented 'we are very impressed with this agency and how they put the children at the centre of their work.'

Staff spoke positively about the support they receive from their managers and confirmed that they are provided with regular formal supervision and opportunities to reflect on their practice. The agency places great emphasis on the development of its staff and foster carers and there is an expectation that all will continually update their knowledge and skills in order to respond appropriately to the changing needs of the young people being referred.

The statement of purpose and children's guide are clear and comprehensive and easily understood. As a result children, young people, parents, relatives, staff and foster carers are clear about the aims and objectives of the agency. An effective quality assurance system permeates all aspects of the service and contributes to continuing improvement. The agency has in place an annual consultation and operational review which is available to all stakeholders. The agency holds a central record of all concerns and complaints which informs improvements in the care provided to children and young people.

The views of children and young people, foster carers and stakeholders contribute to each staff member annual appraisal. The information obtained is also used to identify any concerns and inform developments that will further improve outcomes for children and young people. Specific monitoring systems ensure that managers are regularly provided with information on the well-being of individual children and young people. The progress each child or young person is making in their educational and social activities is discussed with supervising social workers during supervision.

The agency's strategy is to recruit a diverse group of foster carers enables the agency to fulfil their commitments to local authorities as well as their statement of purpose. Effective systems built into the data base, provide the basis for excellent monitoring and ensure that any difficulties arising within a placement are identified early and additional support provided. All significant events are notified consistently. This demonstrates that the agency is taking appropriate action to promote the welfare of children and young people in their care.

Staff, managers and panel members are professionally qualified with a proven track record in children's services, child protection and safeguarding. There is a well-devised programme of training that is valued by foster carers and staff. Supervision of staff and foster carers is effective to ensure the development of the agency positively impacts on children and young people's achievement. This helps to make a positive difference in relation to education, health and welfare. One young person commented 'I feel like part of the family.'

The registered manager is a qualified social worker and a trained social pedagogue. The agency is currently in discussion to develop the Head, Heart and Hands programme which aims to demonstrate the impact that introducing social pedagogy can make to foster carers and the lives of the children they foster. The aim is to improve outcomes for children looked after and contribute to them being able to fulfil their potential. Many aspects of social pedagogy are present in the approach of the agency and the training delivered. As a Social Pedagogue, the Registered Manager is acutely aware of the importance and the positive effects of creative, stimulating and rewarding experiences children and young people can have in their spare time. As part of the fabric of this agency, children and young people are regularly and routinely encouraged to take up leisure activities.

The agency is participating in an exchange programme with an educational organisation in India which offers children and young people an opportunity to visit India on an exchange programme. This provides an excellent opportunity for looked after children and young people to expand their horizon of experience build new relationships and broaden their views. The agency also has links to a charity which is committed to providing children and young people looked after by this agency with additional support, such as mentors, therapy or agreed and identified support at the point of moving on to independence. The agency is also participating in a study tour of European partners looking at the "Alternatives to Custody" an initiative between four European countries. This provides opportunities for the agency to explore new strategies of working with children and young people.

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, 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.