

Children First Fostering Agency Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC034253
Inspection date	22 October 2007
Inspector	Pat Stanton
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	15 January 2007

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Children First Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency established in April 1999 which aims to provide fostering placements for children and young people from birth to eighteen years age. The agency provides long term, short term and respite, bridging, emergency plus parent and child placements. Children First is centrally managed from its head office in Basildon, Essex. At the time of the inspection the agency has 53 children placed with 41 foster carer families.

Summary

This inspection was reduced to cover only the key standards as the service received a full key inspection from the Commission of Social Care (CSCI) in January 2007. Previously the service was rated excellent by the (CSCI) with no follow up actions or recommendations required. At the last inspection (CSCI) registered the Responsible Individual as the new Registered Manager and the previous Registered Manager as Responsible Individual. Both the Registered Manager and Individual received feedback at inspection. As part of the inspection process outcomes for foster children, foster carers and staff were examined to evidence how recent changes in management affected the outcomes of children. The inspector found the quality of care to foster children and carers remained of high standard, however there is no quality assurance system or risk assessment of the new premises. The agency is fully committed to providing a multi-cultural service and has recruited foster carers from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In particular, the agency has specific expertise with regards to caring for children of an African or Afro-Caribbean background. The agency assesses each child's needs against the carers' ability to meet these needs and only offer placements where an appropriate match can be made.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has updated the excellent Statement of Purpose and children's guide to reflect the changes in management and service location. Carers and staff have benefited from an excellent programme of training arranged by the agency to help meet the changing needs of foster children and staff supervision has been increased and formalised.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The fostering service ensures that it provides foster carers with information and training to help each foster child receive health care, which meets their needs in respect of physical, emotional and social development. Supervising social workers offer carers appropriate information according to the child's age to help them understand the importance of keeping healthy. Examples include advice regarding diet, sex, alcohol and substance abuse. Carers attend regular first aid training and have home assessments regarding health and safety issues. Carers confirm training at the agency is excellent. Good records are maintained to show that young people access medical appointments and specialist health services where needed. Foster children are registered with a GP and supported when attending medical appointments by carers. Files and carers evidence foster children receive care from doctors, dentist, looked after nurse and

various therapists when required. All foster children seen at inspection appeared happy, healthy and settled. Carers say the agency helps fund a wide range of therapeutic services for both children in care and themselves. Foster carers encourage young people to have a healthy diet and special diets are encouraged for children who require them, examples include improved self-esteem for children who lose weight. Foster children say they enjoyed healthy food provided by carers, but healthy diet intake is not evidenced in diary notes examined at inspection. Foster carers are encouraged to ensure foster children try different cultural food types and the agency supports carers to research foster children's ethnic background to help them prepare food from their country of origin. The agency encourages foster children to exercise and encourages healthy lifestyles. Examples include collecting children from school on bikes.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

F Forms from prospective foster carers examined confirmed all relevant checks are completed to ensure foster children are protected from harm. The agency also checks the close network of people who visit carer homes or have contact with the foster carers, including children over 16 years of age. The agency ensures foster carers are aware of keeping foster children safe, including maintaining strict boundaries, record keeping and appropriate sanctions to encourage social acceptable behaviour. Examples include foster children being grounded on a particular night following the young person's inappropriate social behaviour whilst out with friends. Good examples of appropriate boundaries were observed between foster carers and children in the home and communication between carers and children is positive and respectful. Young people appear settled in their placements and present few behavioural difficulties. Records evidenced that the agency contacts appropriate professionals following any accidents or incidents, including child protection referrals. Young people spoken to say they feel safe in the carer's home and were allowed privacy when in their bedroom or bathroom. At inspection carers had the necessary equipment to help keep children safe examples include smoke alarms and first aid boxes. The agency ensures children have access to anti bullying material to help keep them safe and a children's guide which includes details of who to contact if they wish to report any concerns. The number of incidents and accidents examined indicates a settled agency. Children spoken to say they were not bullied and confirm they have access to independent advocates. The service promotes the safeguard and welfare of foster children and has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff working at the agency. The agency recruits carers to meet the needs of children and young people for whom it aims to provide a service. Supervising social workers are allocated approximately 7 - 8 carers each and are responsible for the recruitment and assessment of carers. The supervising social workers prepare comprehensive F1 assessments which include very detailed information to ensure suitability. Social workers say it is helpful to recruit and assess carers themselves as they can identify clearly trends which may reoccur during the assessment which helps identify areas of weaknesses. Successful candidates are then presented to a panel. Panel minutes examined consisted of appropriate panel members including three independent individuals, a foster carer and a previous adopted child. The foster panel has a clear written policy and procedure, which is implemented in practice, regarding the handling of confidential information. Minutes examined, confirmed panel meetings are thorough, efficient and professional. Post assessment training for foster carers is very good and carers say they enjoy attending training to help keep foster children safe, examples include child protection and first aid training. Matching is carefully considered and the agency is able to match foster children well with different ethnic foster carers, who are capable of meeting the foster children's needs. Foster children are matched with carers

who research the young persons background to help them preserve their identity. The service protects young people from all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and deprivation. Carers and agency staff are conversant with the procedures for reporting incidents of abuse. Files confirmed the agency has an appropriate child protection policy. Foster children say they feel safe. The agency premises are suitable for function. Training, counselling and panel meetings take place at the premises where visitors sign in and out, to protect young people. The premises are protected by a locked office to help keep confidential information about foster children safe. Fire checks completed at inspection found the agency had not yet completed a fire risk assessment of the premises or completed records for fire evacuation, however a fire maintenance person attended the office to address fire safety during inspection.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency ensures that children and young people receive the specialist services they require, examples include special catering equipment for young people to promote independence. The fostering service gives a high priority to meeting foster children's educational needs. Carers are supported to help children achieve full potential. Files and discussions with children confirm carers support children with homework and shared successes. Educational achievement forms a large part of the ethos of the agency who praise children for success. Files confirmed foster children have personal educational plans and young people spoken to confirm they attended full time education in schools and colleges. Carers say the agency provides educational support for children and themselves. The agency arranges annual holidays for foster children each year but following consultation this year the agency instead gave carers funding to take children away themselves. The agency provides a football club season ticket for use by carers and children. Foster children made a range of favourable comments regarding the activities, season ticket and hobbies that they pursue and it is evident that the specific interests of individual children are taken into account by foster carers. Respite care is provided by other suitable carers within the agency and records are kept on file to recall details.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that each foster child is encouraged to maintain contact and develop family contact and friendships, as set out by the foster placement agreement. Children seen confirmed they have friends over to visit them in the carer's home. Children's placements are subject to regular review, as evidenced on both files inspected. Foster carers and children are encouraged to attend reviews to give feedback and the agency encourages children to have a voice. Foster children also give their views and opinions on annual days out and during visits by supervising social workers, who ensure foster children are seen at least every six weeks. Children at inspection confirm they attend reviews and can talk in confidence to the agency social worker. Case files evidenced that contact with family is promoted and supported where appropriate by the agency. The agency keep foster carers and children informed during supervision visits, some carer's meetings, by post, telephone and email. Carers confirmed they are visited unannounced by the agency and say they feel valued and part of a "big family, we are listened to." Foster carers and children appear happy with the amount of supervision they receive from the agency and the out of hours support. Files confirmed the agency are prompt with their responses to any issues that arise and carers confirm that when called, the agency responds appropriately.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The two case files sampled evidenced the summary of work undertaken at review in relation to the foster children in respect of health, education and leisure needs. Care plans include all the relevant information as required by schedule 2 but sampled plans did not evidence managerial oversight. The Registered Manager stated this was overdue, however files seen contained updated relevant information necessary and details of foster children's preferences. Carers confirmed they always receive their allowance from the agency on time and save money for foster children each week. Foster children confirm they have access to independent advocates. Foster children are encouraged by the agency to become independent and examples of good support were seen. Young people say they feel prepared for moving on.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose, Carer's Handbook and Children's Guide have been updated to include new staffing arrangements and Ofsted contact details. The Statement of Purpose contains all relevant information including procedures for making a complaint. The Children's Guide examined was excellent and contained all essential information and details of children's rights, who to contact and age-appropriate useful information regarding the law and age consent. The agency has relocated in the past year to new premises which are bright, clean and spacious with adequate facilities for disabled children. Foster children do not usually visit the agency premises but may occasionally use the premises for supervised visits. Both staff and foster carers are supportive of the service and confirm staff are approachable, supportive and professional. Carers say "they are very supportive". The agency arranges regular coffee mornings for carers who confirm the meetings are useful to help share experiences. The Registered Manager does not attend carers meetings unless invited but carers confirm they prefer to meet without management present but who will attend if they have an issue. The agency staff are supported formally and informally to help them carry out their roles and staff confirm the frequency of one-to-one supervision is met, as recommended in the National Minimum Standards. Training is a priority and benefits all staff and carers in successfully being able to work with young people with different needs. Examples of training this year include; substance misuse, child protection, first aid, life story, fostering and the law and men in fostering which one male carer stated was excellent. Carers are supported by the agency to attend National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 3 training. Administration staff at the agency also attend core training themselves and are aware of the signs of abuse and procedures for reporting abuse. The management of the agency provides good systems and support for the staff and young people. The Registered Manager has a qualification in Social Work and Psychology and has now worked at the agency full time since 2000, currently undergoing a management course equivalent to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4, however this course does not include a child care element. Staff are complementary of management and confirm they are encouraged to voice their views and opinions in staff meetings but this could not be evidenced in staff meeting minutes examined and staff confirm meetings appeared less frequent recently. The agency completes an annual review of the service each year but does not include confidential views and opinions from children, staff, carers and placing authorities. Staff members confirmed they received appropriate support and induction programmes to help them develop and meet the needs of children. Staff say " We work well as a team and discuss things, as we are all from backgrounds."

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
4	ensure the service is reviewed with the inclusion of the views and opinions of foster parents, children placed with foster parents and their responsible authority (Regulation 42).	29 January 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering agency has appropriate fire risk assessment and evacuation procedures (NMS26)
- ensure there is a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of records and remedial action is taken when necessary (NMS25.3)
- ensure the Registered Manager completes a qualification that matches the competencies required by the NVQ Level 4 in Childcare Management
- ensure staff have the opportunity to attend regular staff meetings (NMS20.5).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.