

# Team Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC060698
<b>Inspection date</b>	19/07/2013
<b>Inspector</b>	Mandy Williams
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Rosemarie Holden
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	08/10/2010

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Team Fostering is an independent, 'not for profit', fostering agency. It was first established in the North East of England in 2001. This inspection was conducted at the Sheffield office, which covers the Yorkshire and East Midlands area. This office opened in 2003.

The agency undertakes assessment, approval and supervision of foster carers who provide emergency, short-term and permanent placements for children and young people.

At the time of this inspection 77 approved fostering households were providing placements for 94 children and young people.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

This is a good and effective fostering agency. It provides a high quality service that produces good outcomes for children and young people. Young people demonstrate good attachments to their foster carers and have improved in self-confidence since placement. Educational outcomes are also good as young people have access to dedicated educational support staff. They are able to work alongside young people and their foster carers to quickly address any problems in school, as well as pursue educational opportunities for young people. Young people are thriving in their foster placements.

The agency targets its recruitment appropriately, in order to meet the demand of placing authorities. The preparation of foster carers is good and assessments are generally of a good quality. Support from social workers post approval is good and generally foster carers report that they feel part of a professional team, saying, 'It really is a team approach and we do feel part of the team.' Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding of the needs of the young people that they are caring for.

Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the strengths of the fostering agency and have clear plans for further development. Consultation with commissioners is effective. The views of children and young people are also integral to the development of the agency and they have many opportunities to influence planning and service delivery.

As a result of this inspection two requirements have been made. These relate to the agency's decision making processes when a change of approval status is being proposed; and the agency's procedures following receipt of a complaint. A further four recommendations relate to; the supervision of independent assessors; arrangements for agreeing a change of frequency to support visits; the gathering of panel members views for appraisal; and clarity over the status of independent panel members.

## 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
18 (2011)	ensure that the agency complies with the procedure it has established for considering complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency, and by foster parents approved by the agency and that the procedure includes the name, address(including email address), and telephone number of the Chief Inspector (Regulation 18 (1)(3)(a))	06/10/2013
28 (2011)	the fostering service provider must ensure that when reviewing the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation and on informing them of the qualifying determination, that they allow the period of 28 days to elapse; or are in receipt of the foster parents written agreement to any proposed changes prior to proceeding to make the agency decision. (Regulation 28 (7)(9))	06/10/2013

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers understand the nature and level of support which is being provided to them by the fostering service; particularly that any variation to

the visiting frequency outlined in the foster care agreement is clear and agreed in writing (NMS 21.2)

- ensure that staff have access to support and advice, and are provided with regular supervision; specifically that independent staff employed to undertake assessments of foster carers receive sufficient supervision for the agency to be assured that all issues have been sufficiently explored during the assessment process; and that records are maintained of any discussions (NMS 24.4)
- ensure that individuals on the central list of panel members in the role of independent member are not employed by the agency (Statutory Guidance, Volume 4 para 5.9)
- ensure that a procedure is established to seek the views of other panel members to inform the annual performance appraisal of the panel chair. (Statutory Guidance, Volume 4 para 5.15)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **good**.

The agency's consultation with children and young people is of a very high standard. Young people are influential in the development of the service. The agency hosts, 'Project Listen', a venue for young people to meet with other young people who share similar experiences and where the agency are able to consult with them about the future development of the service. This has resulted in improvements in service delivery. For example, over recent months the group have re-designed the consultation forms for young people to complete at the time of their foster carer's annual review. The forms are now more child friendly and meaningful for young people. The project is currently in the process of producing a DVD for young people coming into foster care, which features young people talking about their own experiences. They hope this will alleviate some fears and myths. Additionally, young people are involved in the preparation of new foster carers and in staff recruitment. Young people from the group have met with the agency's directors and have also taken part in a conference on delegated authority; where one young person was able to talk about what this meant for them personally.

Children and young people say that they feel safe and well cared for in their foster families. Young people say that they feel treated as part of the family and some have established clear attachments to their foster carers in a relatively short period of time. One young person said, 'I really feel part of this family and want to remain here. I have become much more confident over the last few months.'

Young people are generally well matched with foster carers who are able to meet their needs. However, the number of young people that experience an unplanned ending to their placement is a little above the national average. Procedures for matching have been reviewed and improvements made to the process. Staff involved in the identification of placements utilise a number of matching tools and are familiar with the circumstances of each family. Some young people who were originally

placed on a short-term basis are now enjoying permanent placements with their families. Some young people have remained in their families after their 18th birthday.

Educational outcomes for young people placed with the agency are good; and school attendance is high. The agency is well served by its dedicated education support staff. They will work with; young people; their foster carers; and schools; in order to improve or stabilise a young person's educational placement or improve performance. This includes the undertaking of individual work with young people; as well as training for foster carers; and group work with young people. In addition, a summer school is organised each year with a specific target group of young people. For example, the transition from primary to secondary education. One foster carer commented, 'The summer school really helped 'X' settle into his new school.' School leavers have been the focus for this year's project entitled 'Let loose'. A series of workshops have been planned on a variety of topics, such as; food hygiene and cooking; how to write a curriculum vitae (CV); and team building and problem solving. Staff hope that this will help enhance the skills of young people and improve their self-confidence. Young people receive support to proceed onto higher education or skills based further education courses. This ensures that young people are entering the work place with nationally recognised qualifications. Educational success is recognised and rewarded at celebration events held by the agency.

The health of children and young people is promoted by the fostering agency. Appropriate health information is obtained from placing authorities and consents to medical treatment are evident. Young people are registered with appropriate health services. The agency has recently introduced a 'blue book' where all their on-going health appointments and treatments are recorded. This information will move on with the young person; helping to ensure that this essential information is not lost.

Children and young people are helped to maintain contact with their birth families when it is safe and appropriate for them to do so. Occasionally, the individual needs of young people have resulted in them being unable to be placed alongside their siblings. However, young people spoken to appreciate their differing needs and were positive about the ability to maintain on-going contact. The agency are active in the pursuit of delegated authority for young people so that foster carers and young people are clear about which situations require additional permissions. This has enabled some young people to engage in usual childhood activities, such as a school trip at short notice, or staying at a friend's house. The ability for foster carers to make such decisions has enabled young people to feel they are really part of their foster family.

### **Quality of service**

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

The fostering agency recruits a suitably diverse group of foster carers. Managers are in regular discussion with placing authorities about their needs and the recruitment

of foster carers is targeted appropriately, both in terms of skills and geographic location. The agency has a dynamic recruitment strategy that is subject to regular review. This ensures that the agency's resources are used most effectively. The agency has no foster carers that require an exemption to the normal fostering limit.

— The preparation and training of potential foster carers is good. The agency has recently updated their website information to include additional details of the process of assessment and demands of fostering, as the majority of initial enquiries are made this way. Preparation groups are held regularly and provide potential foster carers with a realistic view of the task ahead. The programme is delivered over a period of 6 days. Contributions by both birth children of existing foster carers and those placed on a fostering basis are included. This comprehensive preparation helps to ensure that only the most suitable families proceed to assessment.

Assessments of foster carers are completed in a timely manner, as the agency primarily employ independent assessors to complete this task. Generally, these assessments are of good quality but on some occasions an additional visit has been required to ensure clarity prior to approval. Weaknesses were evident in the management oversight of these assessments during the inspection. Discussions and management decisions are not always evident on the agency's records.

The agency has an appropriate central list of fostering panel members. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably qualified and experienced. Appropriate references and checks are undertaken on potential panel members and all members have received a performance appraisal in the last twelve months. However, a system has not yet been established to ascertain the views of panel members on the effectiveness of the chair, which would help inform her performance appraisal. In addition, the agency has recently employed an individual who is currently an independent panel member without reviewing her status on the panel.

The agency's system for the drafting and agreeing of minutes following panel is sound. Agency decision making is robust and the reasons for agency decisions are clear and recorded. Agency decisions are also made within the required timescales. However, when considering a change of approval status of foster carers the agency decision has on occasion been made prematurely. The foster carers have been informed of the agency's proposals and of their right to appeal but the agency decision has proceeded without the period of 28 days elapsing, or the receipt of the written agreement of the foster carers.

The fostering agency provides its carers with a high level of support and supervision following their approval. Foster care agreements specify two weekly visits and the agency's website states this will be the minimum frequency. However, a reduced frequency of visits is sometimes agreed as being appropriate. In these cases, these alternative arrangements have not always been clearly agreed in writing so that carers are clear what to expect and what action they would need to take should they require additional support.

Social workers provide a 24-hour support service to foster carers. Foster carers were

very appreciative of this saying, 'There is always some-one that you can telephone in a crisis.' On occasion, the crisis has involved birth family members of the foster carers but carers report an equally positive response from social workers, who demonstrate concern about the welfare of the whole family. Foster carers report that their own birth children are encouraged to be involved with the fostering service. A regular support group is facilitated for birth children and there is no differentiation between any of the children and young people when the agency celebrates success at their 'achievement day', or birthdays are celebrated with a card and a voucher. Foster carers value this inclusive approach reporting, 'I love fostering for 'team', it is so much more than an agency.'

A variety of support groups are facilitated by the agency. This includes groups held in the day-time and evening; full forums that all carers have the option to attend; and smaller geographically based groups. Most groups include an opportunity for some informal discussion as well as a guest speaker or topic for discussion. Attendance at support groups is good. Regular newsletters are also distributed and an annual caravan holiday organised by the agency that all foster carers are invited to attend. Foster carers spoken to on inspection valued this support saying, 'I think staff go the extra mile.'

Foster carers have access to a comprehensive range of post approval training and the agency employs a training manager. Regular core training courses are provided on a range of topics including; de-escalation techniques; the effects of trauma on behaviour; good record keeping; attachment; and moving children on. In addition, foster carers have been enabled to attend courses specific to their needs and to those of meeting the needs of the young people that they are caring for. For example, moving and handling for young people with a disability. The agency expects all foster carers to have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards in foster care within their first year of approval.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

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

Children and young people are safe and say they feel safe living in their foster placements. Fostering agency staff and foster carers receive regular training on safeguarding, so that they are able to take appropriate actions should they have any concerns. In addition, the agency has also facilitated specific training on pertinent issues for young people currently, such as internet safety and child sexual exploitation. This ensures that foster carers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to advise and protect the young people in their care.

The agency recently undertook a survey with young people which confirmed that they felt safe but did raise concerns of bullying for some. In response the agency have; provided an information leaflet for young people; this is now given to young people as they are placed in foster care; provided opportunities for young people to discuss any concerns; and have facilitated a training day for foster carers. This has



provided foster carers with the skills to address any concerns. One foster carer demonstrated how this had helped him talk to a foster child about the effects of bullying others, which had a positive effect. The agency hope they have now fostered openness to bullying that will enable young people to discuss any concerns as they arise.

The agency completes two unannounced visits to each foster home per year in order to ensure the quality of care provided to children and young people. Routine supervision visits are also undertaken at different times of the day, to ensure that the family is observed together on a regular basis. This allows foster carers to have some individual time with their supervising social worker but also ensures that carers own children and those fostered have the opportunity to express any concerns. These measures provide the agency with confirmation that the welfare of young people is safeguarded and that their needs are being appropriately met.

The recruitment of foster carers and agency staff is thorough. Robust checks are completed before individuals commence work with children and young people. The agency has successfully introduced the involvement of both foster carers and young people in the recruitment process for staff. Young people feel that the views they express on such occasions have equal weight to others in the selection process and are aware that candidates have on occasion been asked to return for a supplementary interview to follow up issues raised by young people.

Children and young people receive information about how to make a complaint in the information pack that they receive on placement. This includes information on children's rights and how to contact the Children's Rights Director. All young people spoken to on inspection said they would be able to confide in a trusted adult if they had any concerns.

The fostering agency handles allegations appropriately. The agency works well with other agencies when incidents do occur to ensure the safeguarding of young people and will undertake additional work with families if required. All foster carers are provided with membership to 'the fostering network' so that they are able to access independent advice and support.

## **Leadership and management**

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

The strategic development of the agency is strong. Senior managers and directors keep abreast of developments locally and nationally. They are suitably qualified and experienced and provide clear leadership for the agency. The agency has a well-informed development plan in place that is clearly a 'live' document, subject to the changing needs of placing authorities and is subject to regular review and update. The agency has addressed the two requirements from the last inspection, making considerable progress on the evaluation of service performance and target setting. Additionally, the six recommendations from the last inspection have been met which

has included the introduction and implementation of a new electronic recording system. Leaders and managers demonstrate a real commitment to improving the quality of the service they provide and in improving life chances for young people.

Reports on the operation of the agency are of a good quality and data is recorded and monitored. The management of the agency scrutinise the data collected and lessons are learnt from this. For example, the reasons for unplanned endings of placements have resulted in a more robust matching process and the successful introduction of pre-disruption meetings. These meetings consider whether additional support can be provided to maintain the placement until a planned move can be facilitated or indeed if support can maintain the current placement. Evidence suggests that the introduction of these meetings is having some positive results.

The agency has a complaints process that is accessible to foster carers on the agency's website. The number of complaints made is low but the agency has not complied with their complaints process when dealing with those that have occurred. The agency has continued to undertake internal investigations when they have been unable to conclude the investigation at the informal stage and an independent investigation should have been undertaken. Additionally, the agency's complaints process makes no reference to the contact details for the Chief Inspector. Furthermore, complaint records do not always contain details of the outcome given to the complainant, particularly when this has been given verbally. However, despite the lack of a robust complaints process the agency has learnt from the issues raised in complaints and has made amendments to processes as a result.

The fostering agency has positive relationships with those commissioning its services. They have been pro-active in seeking their own feedback from placing agencies who report very positive working relationships with the agency. Commissioners report that communication with staff is good and that feedback from children's social workers about the quality of foster placements is positive. Regular dialogue also takes place about the future need of the placing authorities.

Permanent staff receive regular supervision, which provides a venue for case discussion as well as a learning environment where developmental needs are addressed. Decision making is clear on foster carers' records post approval as records are maintained on carers' electronic files as well as recorded in staff supervision. Staff also receive an annual performance appraisal that includes a personal development plan for the year ahead. Staff say that they feel well supported and that managers are open to their suggestions about further developments in the agency. Staff also report that caseloads are manageable.

An independent reviewing officer, employed by the agency specifically for this purpose, chairs the annual reviews of foster carers. Reviews are completed appropriately. The first review and any subsequent review that recommends a change of approval status is referred to the agency's fostering panel. The agency is currently involved in the piloting of new review forms for the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). They have embraced this opportunity to be part of a new development that they feel contributes to is a more thorough and meaningful

review for foster carers.



## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.