

Enhanced Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Enhanced Foster Care is an independent fostering agency that is part of the owner-managed Enhanced Children's Services Company. The fostering agency was registered with Ofsted in 2007; it has offices in Warminster, Wiltshire and in Newton Abbot, Devon.

This fostering agency provides a range of placements for children and young people needing short, medium and longer term care. These include: emergency, respite, bridging, sibling groups, unaccompanied children, youth justice fostering, 'step-down', 'staying put', therapeutic and parent and child placements. The agency currently provides 50 fostering households and has 48 children in 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: **Good**

The fostering agency's ethos of 'to go above and beyond; to go that extra mile' for each young person placed with their foster carers is clearly evidenced in individual outcomes for young people. Many of the young people placed, have complex needs and behaviours and they are making good progress, with some individuals making exceptional progress, based on their starting points.

Young people receive the specialist help they require to satisfactorily meet their individual needs; they are thriving while living in their foster homes. Their safety, welfare and access to education are secured by the agency's robust management oversight and its effective partnership working arrangements with placing authorities and local services.

Placement stability within the fostering agency is good. It has steadily improved over the past three year period, supported by successful placement moves within the agency for some young people, enabling the continuation of specialist support services to be provided to that young person. Only 2% of young people experience unplanned endings compared to the national figure of 12% for all independent fostering agencies.

The diverse skills, experience and geographical locations offered by foster carers provides a range of differing placement options. This choice and the agency's willingness to listen to, and take account of young people's views about possible future placements contribute to effective matching processes between young people and foster carers. Appropriate placements that are likely to meet each young person's diverse needs result.

Young people feel included and settled living in their foster family; they form strong and trusting relationships with family members, helping them to feel safe and secure and be able to deal positively with personal difficulties and to try out new things.

The agency's recruitment, selection, preparation and assessment processes for new foster carers are extremely thorough. The agency's foster carers are very much a part of the professional team supporting the young person; they provide sound care in line with the agency's statement of purpose. The good support, supervision and training that they receive from the agency enables them to care for and meet the diverse needs of the young people placed with them. Foster carers demonstrate excellent nurturing skills, innovative practice and a high level of commitment, assisting individual young people to achieve and succeed.

The inspirational, ambitious and ethical leadership and management of this agency underpins young peoples' improved and exceptional progress and the positive differences they experience. The Registered Manager's 'hand-on' and visible management style inspires the foster carers and gives them confidence in looking after young people with high levels of challenging behaviour or complex needs. The senior management team's strong management oversight also protects the safety and welfare of young people in placements.

The agency meets legislative regulations. Four recommendations for improvement are made at this inspection in relation to the consideration of best practice.

Areas of improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

ensure the written minutes of panel meetings are accurate. In particular, record the date of the approval of the minutes of the meeting by the Panel Chairperson prior to

passing them to the Agency Decision-maker for their review; and ensure minutes of each panel meeting are reviewed and signed off by the Panel Chairperson of that specific meeting (National Minimum Standard 14.7)

progress the plans in place to deliver 'face-to-face' training to foster carers in working with children and young people with learning difficulties/disabilities to assist them in the meeting the specific needs of the children they care for or are expected to care for (National Minimum Standard 20.8)

review the location of training venues and their distance from all foster carers' homes to ensure training fits within a framework of equal opportunities; that is, being organised to facilitate manageable attendance by all foster carers (National Minimum Standard 20.10)

encourage and support the re-establishment of regular peer support/self-help groups for foster carers across all geographical areas covered by the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 21.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The young people are matched with foster carers who are capable of meeting their needs. The agency provides a number of 'sibling group' placements that enable brothers and sisters to remain living together.

The young people receive good information about the fostering agency and their prospective carers so that they know where they are going to live. They can come to visit, stay for tea, or sometimes stay overnight with the carers, to help them decide if they want to live with that particular foster family. One young person said, 'I came to this foster home and interviewed the foster carer to find out what it would be like to live here. This helped me make the decision about whether or not I wanted to come.' On arrival at their new home, young people feel welcomed by the warmth and sensitivity shown by their foster carers. Their foster carers find out what they like to eat, what they like to do and what is important to them before they come to live with them, to make sure young people feel comfortable and cared for from their first day in their new home.

The young people are fully included in family life; they feel valued and are treated with respect. Many young people want to have their own pet and foster carers carefully consider if it is possible to grant this wish. One young person said, 'my foster carer has bought me some turtles. I came in one day and they were just here!'

The young people stay with their foster carers for as long as they need to. This includes foster carers considering young people remaining with them under Special Guardianship Orders. Several young people over 18 years of age, are 'staying put' with their foster carers who are continuing to provide the care and support they need until the young person feels ready to leave home. When young people's plans are for them to eventually return home to live with their families, they receive excellent support from their carers to keep in touch with family members to sustain their family relationships. Foster carers skilfully support young people to deal with their emotions and help them to gain a better understanding of their heritage and family.

The stability provided by their foster homes helps young people to form trusting relationships with adults and they feel safe and secure. They receive the specialist support and/or therapy that they may need to maintain their well-being and support their personal development. The young people become confident enough to make positive changes in their lives, including increasing their attendance at school and college and achieving in their education. Foster carers advocate on behalf of their young people, championing their wishes and making sure they receive all of the help and support they need to succeed. They are robust in their challenges to secure the best they can for their young people.

The frequency of those individuals who have a history of 'going missing' has significantly reduced, incidents of challenging behaviour are becoming more

infrequent and young people are becoming more aware about how to keep themselves healthy and safe.

The young people are not discriminated against because they live in a foster home. They have at least the same experiences and opportunities as other young people have who are living with their families. The young people benefit from living with inspirational carers who actively and successfully encourage them to take part in a wide range of activities and support them in gaining employment. The young people are discovering their talents and are enthusiastic about their new found interests and increasing abilities.

Many young people are making exceptional progress in aspects of their lives, including gaining awards in recognition of their commendable contribution to their community. Most importantly, the young people say they have fun, their foster carers are kind and they are happy living in their home.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Placing authority Commissioners report a high level of satisfaction with the quality of placements provided by this fostering agency. They note that many young people placed by them have high risk and challenging behaviours, and they commend the stability of placements and low numbers of placement breakdowns. Sibling group placements are highlighted as desirable, local placements where children and young people make good progress. Placing authority social workers report positively about the care and support young people receive from the foster carers and the good progress they are making. One worker commented, 'the service is very committed to the young person and have really gone above and beyond to support her. They have always been willing to be flexible in the support arrangements and they have coped with crisis situations very well.'

The fostering agency has established good working relationships and regular meetings with local authority Commissioners. This supports the agency's assessment of current and future needs of placements for young people and assists the gathering of relevant information from placing authorities to facilitate the appropriate matching of young people and foster carers. This helps to maximise the likelihood of a stable placement for a young person. The agency's analysis of the needs of young people who are, or who may become looked after, and the need for parent and child placements and assessments informs their foster carer recruitment strategy and identifies the types of placements they wish to develop.

The fostering agency recruits, assesses, prepares and supports a range of foster carers to meet the needs of the complex and challenging young people placed with the agency. Prospective carers attend the 'Skills to Foster' preparation course which

helps decisions to be made by themselves and the agency about whether or not to proceed with their application to become foster carers. Foster carers report that although they found the assessment process rigorous, assessing social workers worked sensitively with them and overall, they found the process to be a beneficial, learning experience for them, enabling them to reflect on their values and life experiences.

The fostering panel is well established and demonstrates its good capacity to make effective decisions that promote safe, secure and stable foster placements. The panel undertakes its quality assurance function robustly, identifying any gaps in assessments, support or training for foster carers; supporting the safeguarding of young people in placements. However, the panel system in place does not always assure that the Agency Decision Maker receives accurate minutes of panel meetings to assist her in formulating her decisions about the suitability of carers and their approval. No evidence has been found to show that this weakness has detrimentally impacted on decision-making or young people's welfare and safety.

The agency provides a structured training programme aimed to help foster carers gain a comprehensive understanding of their fostering role, and their responsibilities in looking after young people living away from their families. Core competencies and enhanced level training modules support foster carers to meet the diverse needs of the young people they look after. Foster carers are very satisfied with the range and quality of the training that they receive. Some carers who live considerable distances from the agency's two office bases where the majority of training is delivered, find that it is not always a manageable option to fit this in during school hours, given their particular caring responsibilities.

To date, the agency has not delivered any 'face-to-face' training to assist carers who are, or may be expected to do so in the future, looking after and supporting young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Individual carers have undertaken online learning modules and benefitted from attending sessions with play therapists to guide them in meeting young people's specific needs. A social worker reported that a young person with learning difficulties receives sound care and is making very good progress in placement.

Foster carers commend the quality and regular frequency of the supervision and support provided to them by the agency's staff. They have confidence in the abilities and leadership of the Registered Manager whom they respect and can easily contact. The supervising social workers and the agency's 'out of hours' service provide them with an outstanding level of support and guidance which helps them to look after young people effectively and safely. The monthly clinical group supervision forums enable carers to meet with other carers and child and adolescent psychiatrists to consider how best to support the young people they look after. Foster carers find the 'buddying' system operating between carers and the local, informal support groups or coffee mornings particularly valuable. These help them to keep in touch with other carers who understand the fostering task and can offer suggestions about arising care issues. However, in recent months the informal support groups have not been

running in some local areas.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Young peoples' placement plans and safe care policies, alongside training and supervision sessions, guide foster carers in how to protect and support the young people they look after. Robust risk assessments carried out by the agency identify the appropriate action required or support needed to be provided to minimise or reduce any identified risks to individual young people. Managers take the necessary action to reduce levels of known risk.

In line with good parenting, foster carers support young people to take age-appropriate risks and challenge any decisions made that appear 'risk averse' and are likely to stigmatise young people fostered as being different from their peers. These new experiences contribute to their personal development and the acquisition of new skills. One young person said, 'I like going on the zip wire; I go to the badger sets and I can smell foxes!'

Foster carers and staff attend a number of safeguarding courses, delivered at different levels of training. Their training aims to increase their knowledge and understanding of child protection issues which will help them to secure the safety of the young people looked after. Foster carers learn how to support young people in order to reduce their episodes of going missing. Young people's attendance at school is closely monitored by foster carers and social work staff, resulting in any unauthorised absences being quickly identified and action being taken to ensure young people are safe.

Foster carers and staff receive training to develop their understanding of child sexual exploitation issues and the impact of abuse. The Enhanced Foster Care Company has developed its own child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool, using protocols based on research findings and local authority protocols. Direct work focused on child sexual exploitation has been carried out with young people, raising their awareness and ability to protect themselves and thus reducing their vulnerability.

The provision of clinical supervision for social work staff and foster carers provides them with opportunities to discuss and reflect on the impact of any abuse or neglect on the behaviour of young people. Young people know about their placement plans and understand what the agency and carers are doing to keep them safe.

Foster carers report significant incidents and concerns to the agency social work team. The senior management team demonstrate a robust understanding of safeguarding protocols and procedures and referrals and notifications are promptly made to the relevant safeguarding agencies, ensuring the appropriate sharing of information to protect young people.

The fostering agency promotes safe care by carrying out annual unannounced visits to foster homes, to see the home 'as it is' and to observe the quality of relationships between carers and young people. At least yearly health and safety checks of the fostering home environment are robustly undertaken to make sure everyone living in the fostering household are kept safe.

Supervising social workers regularly speak with young people without their carers being present, to enable them to share any concerns that they may have about their care. Young people say they know how they can make a complaint from the clearly written information contained within the agency's Children's Guides.

The thorough recruitment, selection and vetting processes completed for staff, foster carers and members of the panel help to prevent unsuitable persons from having opportunity to harm young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The leaders and managers of the agency are passionate about achieving the best that they can for the young people placed with their foster carers. Their confident, ethical, visible and inspirational leadership and management focuses on ensuring the provision of exemplary safe care and support that meets the unique needs of each young person. Senior leaders and managers demonstrate an excellent understanding of each young person's needs, progress and experiences and the competencies and skills of their foster carers.

Senior managers have taken effective steps to tackle the two requirements and the two recommendations made at the previous inspection, to improve outcomes for young people and the functioning of the agency. Foster carers better understand their delegated roles and responsibilities, helping them to make day-to-day decisions for the young people they look after and reducing the need for unnecessary corporate decision-making. Safe caring policies reflect the individual needs of young people, improving their protection. Staff now receive regular supervision to support them in effectively and efficiently undertaking their roles. Regular monitoring reports of the agency's operation are routinely forwarded to Ofsted for review, strengthening the protection of young people.

Leaders and managers understand the strengths of their agency and have a realistic understanding of areas of its operation that require improvement. Well informed business and development plans build on strengths, consolidate good practice and identify action to remedy areas requiring improvement.

The agency's operation fulfils the aims and objectives in its statement of purpose; there are many examples of 'going that extra mile' for individual young people, resulting in their outstanding progress, positive experiences and improvement in outcomes. The agency's administrative and support functions are efficient, and its

office bases are suitable, contributing to the effective running of the agency.

Staff, panel members and commissioned, independent consultants demonstrate competence and skills in their support of foster carers, to effectively meet the needs of the young people they look after.

Annual reviews of foster carers are robustly undertaken by an independent consultant social worker, providing an impartial oversight of their performance and development. The retention of foster carers is good, and they raise no concerns at all about any aspect of the agency's operation.

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.