

Brighter Futures Fostercare

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Clive Lucas and Jane Partridge
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Brighter Futures Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Upshire, Waltham Abbey in Essex, covering Hampshire, Southampton, Portsmouth, Surrey, Berkshire, Slough, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, London Boroughs, Thurrock, Medway, Kent, East Sussex, Croydon, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex. This is a small fostering agency, operated by a private company. The agency was established in October 2007. It was re-registered under a new company number in February 2014. The service has 97 approved foster carers, in 54 households, offering 122 approved foster places. There are approximately 73 young people living with carers from the agency. The agency provides short-, long-term, respite, parent-and-child, emergency placements and disability 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 that 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 that result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded or promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Overall, this agency provides a good standard of care and promotes good outcomes for children. They live in safe and stable foster placements, where they develop secure attachments to their carers.

Carers are part of the team working around the child. They are very well supported by the agency. They have regular and challenging supervision to help them in their roles of caring for children. Carers are pleased to be working for this agency. They value the ethos of the agency and its leaders and managers. One said, 'I love what I do and [I am] glad I have become a carer.'

The agency recruits carers who, it is felt, will provide good standards of care in line

with the statement of purpose. Detailed assessments are undertaken in a timely way. One carer said that the assessment was 'brilliant and it was me that took extra time to think about it and I was not pressured in any way', Another described it as 'very prompt and professional'.

The management of the agency is very visible and known to carers. Carers value the personal approach that they receive and the ethos of the agency.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that must be taken so that the registered persons meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered persons must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that foster care agreements cover the matters specified in Schedule 5 of the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011. (Regulation 27(5)(b))	31/08/2016
The fostering service provider must not employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. In particular, they must ensure that they obtain full employment histories, and when a person has previously worked in a position in which their duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, verification, so far as reasonably practicable, of the reason why the employment or position ended. (Regulation 20(3)(c))	31/08/2016
The registered person must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The system must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority and the monitoring must include recruitment records and the conduct of required checks of new workers. (Regulation 35(1)(3))	30/09/2016
Ensure that the statement of purpose includes information relating to the services and facilities provided by the fostering service. This relates to parent and child arrangements. Regulation 3(1)(b))	31/08/2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that children are made aware of policies regarding their access to all records kept about them, whether by the foster carer or the fostering service itself. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 52, paragraph 5.75)
- Ensure that the children's guide includes a summary of how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer or Ofsted, if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate. ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services', page 28, paragraph 3.85)
- Ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the training, support and development standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers). ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.3)
- Ensure that support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 20.8)
- Ensure that allegations against people that work with children or members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the local authority designated officer. This relates to the service's making the referral directly and not through the placing authority. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 22.6)
- Ensure that subject to the child's age and understanding, the fostering service ensures that the child receives the children's guide at the point of placement and that the foster carer explains the contents of the children's guide in a way that is accessible. ('Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards', 16.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides children with informative and easily understood carers' profiles, so that they have information on the foster carers and their homes before they move in, or begin introduction visits. Carers' profiles have brief descriptions and photographs of the carers, their house and, when appropriate, pets. Moves of placement can be traumatic for children, but providing them with information and having introductions, when timescales allow, helps children to feel involved and informed. Children are well cared for in their foster homes. Carers know about children's plans and feel involved in delivering them. Children form secure attachments to their carers and feel included in their families. Some made comments about this, stating:

- 'They have become my family.'
- 'They make me feel safe.'
- 'They understand me. I feel like a part of the family. This is the best place that I have been in my whole life.'
- 'They treat me like I am theirs. [I] go on family holidays, get spoilt at Christmas and birthdays, involved with all family get together and activities. Makes sure I am safe and cared for and I am well fed.'

Some children have been with their foster carers for several years. One carer spoke of a child who has been with them since the age of seven. They are nearly 18 now and will be staying with the carers beyond their 18th birthday. Another child who is going to stay with his carers into early adulthood said that it, 'has given me a second life, a choice to make a new start...helped me make right choices for myself. I would not change anything.' Another said that being able to stay with his carers had helped with his stability and emotional well-being. There is no doubt in his mind that he is part of the family.

When it is in children's best interests, carers apply for special guardianship orders. The use of special guardianship orders and staying-put arrangements provide children with placements in which they feel secure and valued. It allows them to have stability and support while they prepare for adulthood. This helps some of them to achieve their aims for their futures, by going to university or undertaking vocational courses that will help with their future careers. Carers have high aspirations for children who live with them. They encourage children to develop social skills through taking part in community-based activities and volunteering. One child has become a youth member of parliament. His carer encouraged him in this and other activities to meet an individual need to develop social skills. Another child was encouraged by his carer to get a part-time job in a restaurant, as he wants to work in catering. He has since gained a place on a college course, achieved a distinction for his first year and was awarded the student of the year award.

Children can express their views on their carers through the carers' annual appraisals. They are also involved in decisions in the foster homes. One set of four

brothers and sister have been able to live together in one placement. They wanted to be clear on the 'house rules' so were involved with the carers in deciding what they should be. This involvement gives children a sense of belonging and helps them to develop responsibility and a sense of purpose. Children say that carers listen to them. One commented that their carers 'always talk about my day whilst having our dinner and discussing the day's events.' Another child wrote to the registered manager to thank him for the book token that all children receive when they first move into their placement. This prompted an exchange of letters between the child and the registered manager about the book that the child bought and was reading. The agency has recently consulted children over their children's guide, and this has informed a review of the guide. Children do not get explicit written information on how they can access an advocate, or how they can see their records. While carers are encouraged to share their records with children, this practice varies from home to home. This could prevent children from being able to see what has been recorded about them.

Children are helped to take responsibility for their behaviour and to take age-appropriate risks. One child spoke of 'boundaries, which I didn't have before.' Other children have been able to get jobs. Younger children are able to have fun with adventurous play and to learn to cross the road safely. Children's routine and complex health needs are met. They are registered with routine health services. Carers encourage healthy lifestyles, and some children with extremely complex health needs are able to live in homes where they are appropriately cared for. Children do well in education because of the stability of their placements and the support that carers provide. One school had written, 'Children are coming to school happy and ready to learn... completing homework... reading at home... [Name] has moved up a reading level which is wonderful. He is very proud... The children are happy and talk about home life... They come to school smiling... The children have been welcomed into a wonderful home and are being cared for superbly... We feel that the children are beginning to thrive in their home.' Other children are preparing for university and further education courses. This strong support for education will help children to achieve their potential and increase their future life chances.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering agency has a focus on recruiting good-quality carers rather than high numbers of carers. This helps them to provide good placements for a range of children, including sibling groups and children with complex needs. There is a theme of ensuring that carers can and do meet children's needs, which runs through the assessment and preparation of carers, their supervision and annual reviews. Supervising social workers will challenge and question carers through regular supervisions. They also provide carers with information and research or help them to find it for themselves. This helps to ensure that carers have the information that they need to provide good care for children. There are some mixed views on training. Most carers feel that it is of good quality and helps them to meet children's needs. Some made specific comments about how training had helped them. For example,

one carer said, 'I have a child who at first had challenging behaviour and training helped me to deal with this.' A small minority of carers who completed surveys before the inspection (6%) disagreed that their training met the needs of the children whom they fostered. Training is provided through face-to-face sessions, on-line courses and workshops at carer support meetings. Providing training for a geographically widespread group with childcare and other commitments can be challenging. A variety of training options such as these help to ensure that most carers' training needs are met. However, the training needs of some individual carers have not been fully addressed with them to ensure that they have the knowledge and information to meet specific children's needs. This has the potential to limit the efficacy of their care.

Of the 54 carer households, seven (14 carers) have not completed the training, support and development standards for foster care within 12 months of approval. The agency is aware of this and is encouraging and supporting carers to attain the standards. It has recently introduced the role of peer mentor. This is undertaken by experienced carers who can support others, for example, to complete the standards. Furthermore, the subject of training and attaining the development standards is regularly discussed during supervisions and carer reviews. The foster panel looks at the training that carers have completed at their first annual review. Notwithstanding this, some carers are significantly late in attaining the standards and this limits their knowledge and awareness in caring for children looked after.

Carers support children's contact. They form positive relationships with children's families and some have successfully advocated for increased levels of contact. This helps children to retain their important family relationships and their sense of identity. It can also help children to avoid feeling torn between their attachments to carers and those to their families. Carers feel part of the agency and the team that is working around the child. They value the support from the agency. One carer commented, 'My social worker and agency are very supportive. Being a lone foster carer, this is very important. I never feel alone'. Carers spoke highly of their supporting social workers and the management of the agency. High levels of support for carers helps them to provide good care for children in stable placements, even through challenging times. The agency enters into written foster care agreements to help to make expectations of each party clear. These agreements do not contain all of the elements set out in the 'Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011'. They do not make reference to corporal punishment not being used, or to the carers' responsibility to adhere to policies and procedures and to comply with any placement plan for the child. There was no evidence of this having any impact on children in placement.

The fostering panel is made up of members from a range of backgrounds and with a range of experience. The panel chair is very experienced and confident in his role. He is able to exercise the panel's independence and has confidence that the agency will respect this. The panel provides a rigorous quality assurance function, which provides information for the agency on the quality of assessments and carers' first annual reviews. Panel considers the knowledge of carers in respect of safer care, internet safety and checks that they have considered the implications of caring for abused children. The operation of the panel helps to provide suitable and safe placements for children.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

There are some strong elements to the agency's safeguarding processes, but some elements of the recruitment process are not strong enough, and this limits to a degree the overall protection of children. Disclosure and Barring Service DBS checks are undertaken and references are sought from previous employers and are verified by telephone. However, not all reasonable steps are always taken to find out from previous employers why the individual left their employment. Furthermore, gaps in employment histories are not always explored. These shortfalls were not identified in the internal monitoring of the service.

Issues of concern or allegations against carers are taken seriously by the agency. Such matters are always reported, but sometimes this is to the placing social worker, who then refers the matter to the local authority designated officer. As the agency does not make the referral, it cannot be sure that full and accurate information is passed on in a timely way. This misses an opportunity to strengthen relationships and understanding with the local authority designated officer. Concerns about the standards of care that carers provide are also addressed by the agency. Unannounced visits to carers are used to ensure the quality and safety of the placement for children.

Children know how to make a complaint. The agency takes an effective approach to dealing with all complaints. They are taken seriously, fully investigated and lessons that help to improve the quality of the service are learned from them. Children say that carers help them to feel safe and that they do feel safe in their foster homes. The agency also helps children to learn how to keep themselves safe. Carers feel that the agency is 'really hot' on internet safety. A workshop to help children understand about internet safety and child sexual exploitation is planned for the near future. The intention is to roll this out across the different geographical areas that the agency covers. When there is an identified risk for a child, the agency uses clear risk assessments to help to reduce this risk. One carer, who is looking after a child who is at risk of child sexual exploitation, said that she had taken part in training and discussed the risks in her supervisions. She said, 'The agency promotes our learning in it.' One carer spoke of proactive discussion about how they should respond if a child who was placed with them displayed risk-taking behaviours. This focus on areas of risk supports carers to help them to keep children safer and to help children to understand about keeping themselves safe.

There is an open culture within the agency. Staff and carers can speak to managers and know about whistleblowing. This provides an important safeguard as those who see the operation of the agency, carers and fellow carers on a daily basis are more able to voice any concerns. One carer commented of the agency, 'They are approachable. They listen and respond as an agency, and they place the importance on children's well-being first and foremost.' Agency staff said that they were able to discuss safeguarding issues with carers because of the training that they had

received.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders and managers develop effective working relationships with placing authorities, including with commissioners who describe very positive relationships with the agency. In some cases, there is very close and effective joint working with placing social workers. Leaders and managers question and challenge placing authorities when necessary, for example, on the information provided on children. In one recent case, significant health information had not been passed on. When this came to light, the registered manager slowed the introduction and moving in process so that carers could be fully informed and their ability to provide a suitable and safe placement could be reviewed. Carers are clear that matching of placements is something that the agency does well. This helps to give placements a good chance of success and to reduce the moves for children due to placement breakdown.

Leaders and managers ensure that children can have fun in their everyday lives through activities in their foster placements, in the community and agency events. One child, who hopes to go into sports psychology as a career, said that carers had helped him to develop an interest in various sports and had not limited him. Outcomes trackers are used to provide information on how children are progressing. These are informative documents that have been recently introduced. They are not yet in place for all children. Registered managers also monitor the progress and issues for children through notifications, school reports and feedback from carers. This, along with the size of the agency, helps managers to have a good understanding of the children in placement. In one case, the monitoring of notifications helped to identify a specific health issue for a child, which health professionals subsequently addressed.

Managers carry out regular monitoring of the service and produce reports that are shared with practitioners through twice-yearly meetings to help to improve practice. These reports are undertaken every three months, which is more frequent than the minimum recommendation. However, the system does not provide for consultation with foster carers, children and placing authorities. While such consultation does take place within the agency, this information is not used to help to identify potential improvements in the quality of care provided by the agency. Furthermore, the reports lack clear data and analysis in parts, so potential shortfalls are not always picked up, and action to address them is not identified. The agency has a focus on improvement, and well informed people such as carers, commissioners and the panel chair are clear that there have been notable improvements. However, this is limited, to a degree, by the shortfalls identified in the quality assurance and reporting process. One area of improvement is the supervision of staff. This has not always been as regular as the agency aims for, but, since the beginning of January 2016, it has been taking place suitably frequently, so that staff performance is monitored and they are provided with support and development needs are identified. Another improvement is the quality of response to and management of notifications of significant events. This helps to ensure that placing authorities and Ofsted are kept

informed of significant events relating to children placed with the agency. Shortfalls identified at the previous inspection have been addressed.

The agency has a children's guide, but only one version and this is not suitable for all age groups and abilities of children. Furthermore, it did not include the email address and telephone number of Ofsted. The registered manager added this information during the inspection. The agency has a statement of purpose that is clear and informative, but does not include reference to the provision of parent and child services. This shortfall has limited impact on children who use the service, but does limit the information for potential commissioners. Foster carers say that the agency operates to its statement of purpose.

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.