
Classic Foster Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Mandy Williams
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Registered manager Mrs Jill Armstead
Responsible individual Mrs Catherine Lockett
Date of last inspection 01/03/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

Classic Foster Care is an independent provider of foster care services. The agency recruits, assesses and approves foster carers who provide a range of placements types. This includes emergency, short term, long term and mother and baby placements.

The agency currently has 49 approved foster carers in 29 households, caring for 33 children and young people.

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**

This fostering agency has a positive effect on the outcomes for children and young people. They make excellent progress when placed with the agency's foster carers. Sound safeguarding practice ensures that children and young people live in safe fostering households.

Good quality preparation and assessment of foster carers results in the approval of individuals who demonstrate a real understanding of children's needs. Only those that the agency has confidence in will progress to approval. Good matching and high levels of support from the agency results in stable placements and emotional security for young people. They feel welcomed into their foster families and are thriving in their placements.

Foster carers feel part of a team and there is effective communication between

them, the agency and young people’s social workers. Foster carers feel valued and supported. They have access to good quality post approval training that helps equip them with the skills they need to meet the needs of the children they care for.

Managers are visible and effective. Staff and foster carers reporting easy access to them. They demonstrate a commitment to development and continually strive for improvement. A breach of regulation relating to the change of approval of a foster carer has affected the agency’s overall effectiveness judgement at this inspection. Recommendations have also been made relating to the performance appraisal of staff and panel members. However, these have not impacted on the progress that young people are making or on their safety and welfare. This is a good agency with a number of outstanding features.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
ensure that the Chief Inspector is notified of any review of the Statement of Purpose within 28 days (Regulation 4(b))	28/08/2015
ensure that on the occasion of the first review, when considering a change to the terms of the foster parent's approval that a report is presented to the fostering panel for consideration. (Regulation 28(5)(6))	28/08/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure that all staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually (NMS 24.6)

ensure that each panel member's performance is reviewed annually and that the panel chair conducts this performance review. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.15)

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people receive a helpful profile of their foster carers prior to meeting them. A hard copy is available and is also kept electronically; the information can then be sent to the local authority social worker and shared with the child prior to meeting their foster family. Young people say this is helpful as they can picture who will be looking after them. Whenever possible, young people are also being given details about placement options, whenever possible. They say this helped them feel part of the decision making process. Similarly, those already in placement feel involved in any decision about another foster child joining the family. Following placement, young people are equipped with a memory box, so that they are able to keep mementoes of their time and achievements in the foster home. This ensures that these memories remain alive for the young person, even if they return to live within their birth family.

Children and young people feel integrated into their foster families. They say that they feel part of the foster family and are included in activities and family events. Young people talk about being able to experience new opportunities and have gained in confidence as a result. Young people's comments include, 'It is fun, great, normal and cool here' and 'I get on great with them' and 'They look after us really well.' Similarly positive comments have been received from children's social workers and include, 'The foster carers are completely child centred and do all they can for X. The young person speaks very highly of them,' and 'The young person's confidence and self-esteem has vastly improved, as has her progress in school.' Foster carers receive clear guidance on the decisions that they are able to make and ensure that young people are able to participate in events and activities along with their peers.

Some young people who were originally placed on a short-term basis are now living with their families on a permanent basis. This has resulted in legal permanence in some instances. Many children are able to grow up alongside their brothers and sisters, or maintain meaningful contact with those that they do not live with. Consequently, young people are thriving with this security and stability, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Children and young people attend school regularly and reports demonstrate the substantial progress made following placement. Efforts are made to enable young people to remain at their original school, unless they express a wish to change school following confirmation that they will remain with their foster family permanently. Foster carers encourage young people to achieve and keenly support their learning. For example, by funding additional tuition so that their chances of succeeding in national examinations are maximised. As a result young people have career aspirations and proceed onto higher education and skills based further education courses. This enhances their employment opportunities for the future.

Young people are learning to take responsibility for their own behaviour and their risk taking behaviours rapidly reduce following placement. They are helped to

understand the implications of their decisions and the vulnerable positions they place themselves in. Foster carers are particularly good at allowing young people to regress and enjoy experiences they may have missed in their early childhood. They provide a nurturing environment and ensure that the experiences that young people have in their home are positive. Consequently, they feel able to enjoy their childhood and want to spend time with their foster carers and as a result they are making significant progress.

Children and young people are able to express their views through a variety of methods. This includes their own social worker; the supervising social worker; by completing feedback forms for the agency; and by participating in events run by the agency. Children and young people are also helped to access an independent advocate should they need one. The children's guide to fostering includes the details that are specific to the young person and outlines how to make a complaint should they wish to do so.

Young people are well supported in their transition into adulthood. The agency works with placing authorities to ensure a positive outcome for young people. Appropriate challenge is made where the young person has not felt ready to move into independence. Some young people have been enabled to remain with their foster carers under 'Staying Put' arrangements. However, the agency also takes the time to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills that they will require when they do move onto independence, maximising their chances of success.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The agency currently has sufficient foster carers to meet demand from placing agencies. The number of approved households has increased by one over the last year. Although, the vacancy rate for the agency appears high, this is due to households having a child in placement who needs to be a sole placement or due to the personal circumstances of the foster carer. The agency has a good understanding of the current need of placing agencies as it monitors the type of placements required and locality requested. Managers use this information to shape the agency's recruitment strategy. However, the vast majority of initial enquiries are as a result of 'word of mouth' recommendations from existing foster carers or their contacts. This is a positive reflection of how existing foster carers feel valued and supported.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers are thorough. The agency responds promptly to initial requests for information and swiftly follow this up by a visit to potential applicants. Assessments demonstrate a clear focus on the applicant's ability to meet the needs of children and young people requiring placement. They contain good analysis and evaluation. This comprehensive preparation ensures that only the most suitable families proceed to approval. The agency employs a small number of independent assessors that are able to undertake

an assessment if otherwise this would lead to delay for the applicants. Hence, assessments are completed within recommended timescales.

The agency has an appropriate central list of panel members. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably experienced. The panel demonstrates appropriate vigour in reaching its recommendations. There is an effective process for agreeing the panel minutes that avoids delay in the decision making process. The agency decision is made following due rigour; includes clear analysis and is made within required timescales.

Post approval training for foster carers is varied and effective. Compulsory training covers a range of issues, including; behaviour management; safe caring; record keeping; child protection; anti-bullying; self-harm; and cultural identity. In addition, training is offered on a range of topical issues and to expand the knowledge base of foster carers. For example, life-story work, attachment, internet safety and child sexual exploitation. Foster carers say that training is relevant, of good quality and that they enjoy attending. The agency expects all foster carers to have completed the Department for Education's Training, Support and Development Standards (TSD) within their first year of approval. Completion rates are high, with 86 per cent of foster carers having completed this. Only one foster carer is outside of this twelve month timescale. Consequently, foster carers have the skills they need to provide high quality care to children and young people.

Foster carers receive a high level of support from the agency. They receive a weekly visit for the first month following the placement of a new child and monthly visits thereafter. Detailed records are kept following each visit which are signed off by the Registered Manager, ensuring that she is kept abreast of the current situation. Foster carers also have access to 24-hour support, as social workers cover an out-of-hours duty system. Foster carers are appreciative of this saying, 'They've been amazing. There is always someone there to offer helpful advice if you need it.' Social worker support is supplemented by that provided by highly efficient support workers. They provide day-to-day support to foster carers and young people when it is required; organise regular activity events for young people and make good use of locally available resources. Specifically approved respite foster carers and an approved babysitter scheme also ensure that families are able to have a break if they need one, with the reassurance that their children are being cared for by someone that they are familiar with. This support helps ensure that foster carers are best able to meet the needs of those that they are caring for.

Effective matching contributes to successful placements. Young people are thriving in stable placements where their needs are being met. The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that foster carers have the information they require on children and young people and to review their care plans. Foster carers say that they feel valued by the agency and that they are part of a team. One foster carer commented, 'It is a pleasure to be associated with this agency, as they truly care about doing a fantastic job.'

The agency recognises and acknowledges young people's achievements. As well as sending young people cards and gifts, they receive a mention in the regular

newsletter and on various displays in the agency's office, such as receiving a special leaf on 'the tree of achievement.' Foster carers' birth children also receive recognition and thanks in this way. Young people thrive on this recognition of their progress.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The safety and welfare of children and young people is central to the functioning of the agency. Children and young people say that they feel safe living in their foster homes. Young people also say that they would feel confident in expressing their views to someone if they did have any concerns. Details are also outlined in the children's guide to fostering that young people receive when placed with an agency foster carer. Young people are familiar with the agency's social workers and have easy access to them at events held by the agency and by regular visits to them in their foster family. This ensures that young people would have an opportunity to express any concerns. Similarly, foster carers birth children are given the opportunity to express their views and staff ensure that they observe the family together on regular occasions. A minimum of one unannounced visit takes place to each foster home annually and more frequently if the agency is concerned about the family being under pressure. These measures ensure the well-being of young people.

Both the agency staff and foster carers receive regular update training in safeguarding. All foster carers complete a safe caring policy that is subject to regular review. This ensures that foster carers do not place themselves in vulnerable situations. However, young people are able to take age-appropriate risks as part of their preparation for independence.

A minority of young people are involved in risk taking behaviour, such as going missing from home. However, there is a significant reduction in incidents following placement with the agency's foster carers. When incidents do occur foster carers are proactive and work alongside the placing authority to ensure that the young person understands the risk they may be placing themselves in. The agency monitors such incidents and ensures that they escalate concerns if they need to.

Foster carers demonstrate a good understanding about the impact of a child's previous experience of neglect or abuse on their development and responses. This is covered as part of their initial preparation and in post approval training. This ensures that foster carers are best equipped to provide young people with nurturing experiences and they respond appropriately to the young people's behaviours. One social worker commented, 'The foster carers demonstrates a real ability to show insight into X's behaviours and to take advice offered. They utilise the training and support that is on offer and transfer this learning to support the young person.'

A range of relevant training is available for foster carers to increase their awareness of topical safeguarding matters. For example, training on child sexual exploitation

and sexual orientation. A workshop for young people is also due to take place shortly on these topics. Foster carers welcome this and now feel confident to talk to young people about the issues this may raise for them. A range of helpful and informative leaflets and information are readily accessible for young people and foster carers when in the agency's office building, which is used regularly for training and social events.

The recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members is thorough. Robust checks ensure that only those who are suitable are involved with the agency.

Allegations and disclosures are immediately referred to the appropriate safeguarding body. The agency works well with other agencies in these circumstances. Staff are sensitive to the feelings of those involved and independent support is available for foster carers who are the subject of an allegation. Detailed records are kept; appropriate bodies are notified and informed of the outcome of any investigation. The safety and welfare of children and young people is prioritised as part of this process.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She has been managing the agency for the last three years. She gained her level five management qualification in February 2015. Together with the responsible individual they provide clear leadership and ensure that the focus of the agency is on promoting positive outcomes for children and young people. Agency staff and foster carers say they are visible, approachable and welcome suggestions for improvement. The one recommendation made at the last inspection relating to notification being made to Ofsted following a significant event has been successfully addressed.

The annual quality and performance data returns are submitted promptly to Ofsted. Quarterly reports are also produced for the directors so that they are able to closely monitor the progress and development of the agency. There are no concerns regarding the financial viability of the agency. There is a development plan in place that is subject to regular review and update. The views and needs of service users are incorporated within this. These demonstrate the agency's enthusiasm to sustain improvement. The agency's Statement of Purpose is subject to regular review and is available on the agency's website. However, the agency has not sent these to Ofsted as required.

An independent person chairs the annual reviews of foster carers and a small sub panel has been set up to consider these, providing a degree of independent scrutiny. However, the agency procedure for changing the terms of approval of a foster carer within their first year of approval is in breach of regulations. This has resulted in one foster carer having their approval changed and children placed with them prior to returning to the fostering panel or approval of the agency decision maker.

Staff receive regular supervision and feel well supported by the Registered Manager. Case work decisions are clearly recorded on foster carers' files. However, the system in place for staff appraisals has not been effective at ensuring that these are held at least annually and some previous records were missing from staff files. Similarly, panel members' appraisals were missing from their files and the panel chair has not been routinely involved in the completion of these. Hence, the development needs of staff and panel members may take longer to acknowledge and address.

The agency has positive relationships with those commissioning its services. They report that communication with staff is good and that feedback from children's social workers about the quality of foster placements is positive. One social worker commented, 'The agency's social worker works closely with myself to fulfil the young person's care plan' and a commissioner commented, 'Classic Foster Care are always well considered in the matches they offer for young people. They always clarify any issues that they are unsure about. They attend all provider engagement events and are in regular dialogue with commissioners about their future need.'

Management monitoring is good. Records are routinely audited and the progress that young people are making is tracked and regularly reviewed. Resources are then identified to help support those that need it. The progress and outcomes for young people remain central to the functioning of this agency.

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.