

# Anchor Fostercare Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC036598
<b>Inspection date</b>	28/11/2014
<b>Inspector</b>	Rosemary Chapman
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full
<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Setting address</b>	1a Beresford Road, Gillingham, Kent, ME7 4ES
<b>Telephone number</b>	01634 283 140
<b>Email</b>	info@anchorfostercare.co.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Alistair John Sutherland
<b>Registered manager</b>	Florence Gwatidzo Sutherland / Linda Jean Shephard
<b>Responsible individual</b>	
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	10/02/2012

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Anchor Fostercare Services is a not-for-profit independent fostering agency based in Medway. As of 31 March 2014 there were 70 foster carers in 45 fostering households, providing 88 fostering placements, of which 49 were filled. In the year April 2013-March 2014 the agency approved 16 fostering households. The range of placements offered includes emergency, long term, short term, parent and child, remand and respite care.

### 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 is a good fostering agency where children and young people experience positive outcomes and are safe and well cared for as a result of a good quality service and robust safeguarding systems. Leaders and managers are actively involved in all aspects of service provision and demonstrate a high level of commitment to develop and improve the service so that children and young people continue to receive a good standard of care.

One particular strength of the agency is its placement stability which compares favourably with other independent fostering agencies. For the last three years the percentage of unplanned endings was below the national average, and so far this year the figure stands at 1%. Almost half of the agency's long-term placements have

lasted over two years, and half of those are longer than five years. As a result, children and young people experience stability and security, form positive attachments with their carers and are enabled to develop to their full potential.

Another significant strength is its engagement with children and young people, including the birth children of foster carers. The agency provides activities every school holiday, including a five-day residential experience once a year. Not only does this enable children and young people to have fun and meet together, it provides the agency with opportunities for effective consultation, as children and young people form positive relationships with the staff involved. One young person confirmed this by saying: 'I trust the staff at Anchor and can talk to them about any worries.'

The leadership and management of the organisation have been strengthened since the last inspection. They have addressed all the previous shortfalls identified and the service has demonstrably improved and developed in many respects. The agency has developed a more systematic approach to recording and monitoring its work, making it easier to see where there are shortfalls in order to drive improvement. It has expanded its sphere of operation to other areas of the country, including the East Midlands and Luton, as well as Hastings and London, appointing project managers to develop the scope further in these locations. Since the last inspection in February 2012 there has been a net growth in placements of 39% and a net growth in fostering households of 33%.

A small number of areas for improvement have been identified as a result of this inspection. These include clarifying the conflict of interest policy, improving the recording of staff supervision, and ensuring that contact with social workers of children already in placement prior to a child being matched with a foster carer is consistently recorded.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

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

- ensure the fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures in relation to the constitution of fostering panels. This relates to clarifying the conflict of interest policy (NMS 14.1)
- ensure that when a placement of a child with a foster carer who already has children living in the foster home is being considered, the consent of the fostering service provider and any other responsible authority should be consistently recorded (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.2)
- ensure the fostering service keeps a written record of each supervision for each member of staff, including the registered person, which details the time, date and length and is signed by the supervisor and the supervisee at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people have good experiences, make good progress and achieve positive outcomes as a result of being in foster care with this agency. One social worker commented of a young person: 'She has turned it around.' They develop in confidence, improve their communication and social skills, become calmer and thrive. Children and young people are enabled to settle by receiving an appropriately simple and child-focused family profile prior to the placement, although this is dependent on the local authority social worker passing it on.

Children and young people are happy, settled and well cared for in their foster placements. They make positive attachments to their foster carers, and a number remain there after they are 18 years old under staying put arrangements. One young person commented in relation to the foster carers: 'I feel pretty close to them.' Placement stability is a real strength, with 22% of the long-term placements being over five years in length, and a below-average rate of unplanned endings. Children and young people usually only move if there is a safety issue, and the carers and agency do their best to make it a positive ending.

Children and young people are fully a part of the foster carers' family life and take part in family holidays, outings and other events. When asked if they felt part of the foster family, young people said, 'very much so'. They have friends to stay over and are fully supported to engage in a variety of interests. They reduce their risk-taking behaviour because they are given appropriate advice and guidance and invest in their placements. The agency works with other professionals to address any concerns so that appropriate support is provided.

The agency supports sibling placements, with 36% of the current children and young people placed in such arrangements. Foster carers are very good at facilitating contact with brothers and sisters who live elsewhere, and will ask for this to be increased if they feel it is in the young person's best interests. They provide hospitality for brothers and sisters at their homes, or transport children to alternative venues, depending on the arrangements in place. Carers also understand the importance of contact with other members of the birth family and promote these arrangements as appropriate. This enables the child to have a better understanding of their circumstances and promotes their identity. Carers also provide memory books of a high quality so that young people have a physical and positive reminder of their time in placement.

Children and young people have good opportunities to express their wishes and feelings. They are encouraged to attend their statutory reviews, they contribute to their foster carers' annual review and they are consulted about what they would like the agency to provide in terms of activities. The regular contact with agency staff engaged with activities and the residential experience ensures they get to know the staff well and trust them.

Children and young people maintain or improve their good health. They develop a better awareness of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle, engage in exercise and eat more healthily. Some young people have stopped taking drugs and drinking as a result of listening to their foster carer's advice. Emotional and psychological needs are recognised and referrals made to local child and adolescent mental health services as appropriate. The response to this varies from two to six months, depending on which area the child resides, and the agency pursues referrals to try to get a more timely response. In recognition of potential delay or geographical inconvenience, the agency provides six sessions of privately funded therapy to anyone placed with their carers. This has had a beneficial impact on outcomes as at least an initial assessment can be completed. Some young people are already involved with statutory services prior to being placed with their carers. Once the statutory services are involved, the outcomes are generally positive, although some older young people find it hard to engage.

All the children and young people attend school or college and are therefore in a better position to improve their life chances. They make good progress, considering their experiences prior to placement. For example, one young person who was not expected to achieve educationally is now at college. Another young person who had very limited recent involvement with education provision is applying to go into the army. One stakeholder said of a young person: 'He has made great strides educationally.'

Children and young people develop a range of useful skills. They are encouraged to pursue their interests, such as rugby, dancing, going to youth clubs and trampolining. They are supported to develop independence skills so that they can make a successful transition to adulthood. The agency has a good programme to support carers with this. One young person commented: 'You get all the support you need.'

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

There are many examples of good practice in the way the service is delivered. Foster carers are recruited from a range of backgrounds so that they can meet the needs of the children and young people requiring a foster placement. Many of the children and young people currently placed with this agency's foster carers have very complex needs including significant disabilities, and these are met to a high standard.

The preparation, assessment and approval of foster carers address the competencies which foster carers require to meet the needs of looked after children. Foster carers are positive about the Skills to Foster training and comment that they understand its relevance more clearly once children are placed with them. Assessments are generally analytical and where these are of a lesser standard than expected, systems are in place to address this. For example, the panel adviser supervises the assessing

social worker and also reads the report prior to its submission to the fostering panel, and requests further information where necessary.

In addition, the fostering panel provides a robust and thorough quality assurance function and has a systematic approach to considering its business. The panel is well administered, and members receive their papers in good time to enable them to give them their full consideration. The panel is chaired by an experienced, suitably qualified person who commands respect. The membership is diverse and includes foster carers, a care leaver as well as a variety of professionals whose backgrounds reflect health, education as well as social work. This enables the panel to offer different and valuable perspectives when making its recommendation. However, the conflict of interest policy lacks clarity, and on occasion, consideration should have been given to whether a conflict of interest should have been declared. Panel minutes are an accurate and comprehensive record of the panel's business and provide the agency decision maker with the information required, in addition to the reports, on which to base their decision, which is timely and well considered.

Matching has been improved by the use of a matching tool which makes it easier to demonstrate where there are gaps and how these are to be met. Carers confirm there is no pressure to take a placement if they do not feel they can meet the child's needs, and the agency takes its responsibilities very seriously in this regard. Although social workers of children already in placement are consulted prior to another child being placed with those foster carers, this is not consistently recorded to demonstrate that it takes place in every case. The agency ensures it receives sufficient information about children to enable foster carers to understand their needs and how they will meet them. Foster carers are very clear about delegated responsibility and have a clear understanding of their role.

Foster carers are well supported to enable them to provide appropriate care and support to the children in placement. Supervision is regular, well recorded and focuses on the needs of the children and the progress they are making. The out-of-hours service is well received and provides advice and support, including visits, in times of crisis. One carer commented: 'I wouldn't have managed without it.' Respite is also provided but many foster carers do not use this; however, when it is used, it is to provide support to maintain placement stability, using consistent carers.

Training is an area which has seen considerable improvement following the last inspection. The training programme is comprehensive and there is a clear expectation that carers complete training on a regular basis. Most carers have achieved their training, support and development standards within 12 months of approval. The small minority (6%) that have not achieved this is because they have not had a placement so cannot fully demonstrate their competence.

Foster carers work well in partnership with both the agency and the local authority. They feel valued and part of the team. They comment that the agency supports them without undermining them, although supervising social workers will step in if the foster carers need their input. One carer commented of the supervising social worker: 'She is brilliant at this.' Foster carers are good advocates for the young

people and support them well at their statutory reviews. The agency also supports the statutory review process by providing a written report, which is a new development, and attending the meeting. This ensures the local authority and independent reviewing officer have full and up-to-date information on which to make any changes to care planning.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are safe because the agency places safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children at the centre of everything it does. Foster carers and staff are subject to robust vetting procedures to ensure they are suitable people to work with and care for children and young people. They are further supported by ongoing relevant training to enhance their skills and knowledge. This includes issues such as child sexual exploitation and internet security. Where shortfalls have occurred in practice, the agency has taken robust action to address this, by reflecting on practice, clarifying and updating procedures, and promoting further training. This demonstrates a responsive approach to improving safeguarding practice.

Children and young people have a number of people with whom they can share any worries or concerns. The agency ensures that its supervising social workers see children alone during some of the supervisory visits, which include at least one unannounced visit a year. The unannounced visit enhances safeguarding practice by being carried out by a different member of staff as a 'fresh pair of eyes'. Children and young people cite their foster carers as their main avenue of support, but they can also talk to agency staff, their own social worker or independent reviewing officer. They also receive written information about independent sources of advice and support to increase the range of people to whom they can turn. Complaints made by young people have been taken seriously and resolved appropriately. Children and young people also receive a health and safety booklet to complete, which includes useful information on telephone and internet safety. They are encouraged to read and complete it by the incentive of a gift voucher.

Foster carers are supported to keep children and young people safe by the use of comprehensive risk assessments and safe care plans which are individually tailored and updated regularly. This provides carers with strategies to use to protect the children and young people in placement. A social worker commended particular foster carers on how well they were able to safeguard the children in placement in difficult circumstances, demonstrating both their knowledge of what to do and their commitment to put this into practice. Another commended foster carers on their approach in addressing bullying and their advocacy skills in this situation. Children and young people are enabled to develop and mature at an appropriate level. Foster carers encourage them to use public transport and walk to school alone, for example, taking into account their age and maturity. One young person commented that she liked the freedom her foster carers gave her.

Young people are supported to reduce their risk-taking behaviour such as going

missing. This has reduced significantly for those young people for whom it had been a concern. Foster carers ensure that the young people are aware of the choices they can make and the consequences of their actions. They make them feel welcome, safe and secure and this has a positive impact on the frequency of the times they go missing. Foster carers are aware of the procedures to follow, implement these and keep the agency informed. The agency engages in professionals' meetings to ensure concerns are discussed in a multi-agency forum so that all protective measures are fully explored.

The agency implements appropriate procedures if children make disclosures or in the event of any allegations made about foster carers. It cooperates fully with the local authority designated officer to ensure thorough investigations are carried out.

### **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency works well with commissioners and local authority social workers, resulting in effective placements. Positive comments reflect the prompt and responsive approach to requests for placements as well as the professionalism of supervising social workers and their good communication. One stakeholder commented: 'It is a very helpful agency.' Another stakeholder said: 'I am impressed. They have very good placements and good outcomes.' Trends in referral requests inform the agency's recruitment strategy, and it is noteworthy that the agency has adopted a more strategic approach to foster carer recruitment since the last inspection. For example, a need for more therapeutic placements has been highlighted and is being piloted in the East Midlands in response to this. The recruitment strategy is detailed and reflects a realistic growth plan.

A real strength of the agency is its emphasis on promoting activities for the children and young people who are not only fostered but also the birth children of foster carers. This affords the children with plenty of opportunities to have fun, meet each other, develop social skills as well as engage with the agency staff. Children and young people are also invited to an annual five-day residential experience to further enhance their experiences and develop their skills while giving the carers a break.

Leaders and managers have good systems for monitoring and tracking children's progress, which have been further developed to make them more effective. This is underpinned by qualitative, regular monitoring of the whole service and quarterly reporting to the senior management team. These reviews highlight learning and action points to drive improvement, and are comprehensive in their scope.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are available on the website so that anyone who wants to see what the service provides can access this information. The Foster Carers' Charter has been developed with the involvement of the agency's foster carers to make it a relevant and meaningful document to inform service delivery and is also on the website for ease of access.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a positive attitude towards improvement. They have fully addressed the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection, resulting in a service which is now judged as good. They have tightened up their systems, procedures and monitoring, making the service safer and more effective. They now ensure that notifications are made in a timely way to enable the regulator to assess the agency's response to significant events. Foster carer training, supervision and review are now more comprehensive and timely and there is clearer evidence of safe care practice within records. They also demonstrate that they learn from complaints and feedback by reflecting and improving the agency's practice. Staff comment that they can raise any issues or ask them to consider improvements and they are listened to.

Staff are appropriately qualified, skilled and experienced. They are committed to providing a good quality of service so that children's and young people's outcomes improve. They are regularly supervised but not all the records detail the length of the supervision, and the current Registered Manager's supervision is not recorded. This makes it difficult to assess the quality and impact of supervision. Additionally, staff receive clinical supervision from a clinical psychologist. This enables them to reflect on their practice and consider other strategies for working with children and foster carers. Staff are appraised annually and there is a system for obtaining the views of children and foster carers to inform this process and make it more meaningful.

Staff receive regular training to keep them up to date with current issues and improve their skills and knowledge. The agency has supported staff in obtaining the social work qualification, and it is currently supporting staff to study British Sign Language so that they can communicate more effectively with children and carers who are deaf. Staff feel well supported and are positive about working for the agency because leaders and managers are approachable, available and demonstrate a willingness to listen and improve.

## 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, 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.