

Lighthouse Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Sophie Wood
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Service information

Brief description of the service

This independent fostering agency is a registered limited company, operated on a not-for-profit basis. Additional operational oversight is provided by an advisory board, comprised of adult care leavers, who meet on a three-monthly basis.

The agency trains and supports its foster carers to implement the Secure Base model of care giving, and is set up to provide the following types of placements: emergency, short-term and bridging, parent and child, children with disabilities, sibling groups, respite, remand, unaccompanied asylum seeking children, assessment, solo placements for complex needs, residential transition and staying-put.

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 (NMS), 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 NMS, 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**

Since becoming registered in September 2014, the agency has already undergone significant changes. New premises provide improved secure office space in a location readily accessible by road and public services. New data collection systems are being implemented, resulting in the quicker storage and retrieval of required information, and additional directors are joining the agency. Its financial operation and viability are strengthened as a result.

Additional organisational stability is further demonstrated by the recent appointment of a new manager, who has made application to be registered with Ofsted, and an assistant director who is working to support directly the responsible individual and manager. Current foster carers say that the changes have been effectively

communicated and implemented, resulting in regular, good quality support which enables them to care for the children and young people effectively.

As a consequence of such changes, the agency has not grown in accordance with its original business plan. Valid and measured reasons affecting growth include the agency recognising that it needed to review its senior management arrangements and oversight. With five fostering households providing good-quality care, based upon thorough matching procedures, the agency is very clear about its blueprint of high-quality care. An active and creative advertising campaign is now underway and already generating a lot of interest.

In order to meet the high number of initial enquiries from prospective foster carers, the agency is using a number of independent social workers, support for existing foster carers is being provided by the new manager and assistant director. The agency envisages this as a temporary solution while permanent social worker recruitment is ongoing. While such arrangements meet an immediate need, there are negative consequences, such as conflicting roles and priorities for the manager and assistant director.

Foster carers are an integral part of the team and are treated as such. They accurately describe their role and diligently describe how they are meeting the needs of children and young people. Regular visits to the agency's head office are enjoyed by children and young people. One young person said, 'they always ask how I am and if I've got ideas about Lighthouse. I just say I love how it already is.'

Consultation with all stakeholders is a strength. The agency routinely canvasses placing authorities, health-care providers, its own foster carers and children and young people for ongoing feedback. Regular board meetings examine the findings. Many of the recent changes were influenced by such feedback.

Senior managers recognise that current growth and expansion requires careful monitoring and planned periods of consolidation. The requirements and recommendations made from this inspection highlight the areas and topics which need to be addressed at such a critical time for the agency.

Areas of improvement

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered persons 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
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to- (a) the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it, and (b) the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents (Regulation 19(a)(b)).	30 April 2016
The fostering service provider must ensure that all permanent appointments are subject to the satisfactory completion of a period of probation, and provide all employees with a job description outlining their responsibilities, and that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal (Regulation 21(1)(a)(b) and (4)(a)).	20 May 2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service (NMS 20.4)
- Ensure that the fostering service demonstrates, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices (NMS 19.2)
- Ensure that foster carers are trained in health and safety issues and have guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. Specifically, ensure that all relevant health and safety checks in respect of fostering households are completed, kept up to date, and monitored by the agency (NMS 10.3)

- Ensure that foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. Specifically, ensure that children's individual risk assessments and safer care guidance is regularly reviewed and monitored by foster carers and their supervising social workers (NMS 4.2)
- Implement and embed a process for the panel to provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS14.2).

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

All of the current children and young people are within the first few weeks or months of their placements with the agency. This is fully recognised by foster carers and agency staff. Consequently, everyone's focus is on establishing children's and young people's feelings of safety and familiarity within their new homes.

Children and young people are warmly welcomed by foster carers, who have been extremely well matched to meet their needs. They are very much at home and quickly become established family members. Comments from children included, 'I call them mum and dad', and 'it's just my home here'. A foster carer said, 'it's all about settling in and feeling safe. You can't do anything else until you've got that bit right.'

In accordance with their age and understanding, children and young people are encouraged to contribute to their own care plans. Older children say that this is especially important, particularly when they moved into care quickly. Examples of how this is achieved include open and honest discussions between foster carers and young people. This fosters trust and respect. Children and young people are empowered to ask questions and to make sense of what has happened in their lives. One young person spoke of the relief that they felt upon arriving at their new foster home. They said, 'I didn't know what was going on until I got here. My carers helped me to understand and they always explain things to me.'

Despite the majority of placements being in the early stages, children and young people are already making good progress from their starting points. Examples of such progress include regularly attending school, engaging with therapy and learning to express and communicate their frustrations and anger in more appropriate ways. Their personal growth and development are being aided as a direct result.

Some children and young people have previously engaged in behaviour which have placed themselves and others at significant risk of harm. Others have been targets of such behaviour and are highly vulnerable as a result. The support mechanisms in place are helping them to take appropriate responsibility and to make better and safer choices. Children and young people are learning to take control and to seek the advice and guidance which will help them.

Foster carers are extremely mindful of the importance and significance of children's and young people's family circumstances and relationships. Prescribed contact arrangements are sensitively supported. For some children and young people, such arrangements are difficult, complex and subject to restrictions. In such cases, children and young people benefit from having empathic foster carers who actively listen, soothe and help them to work through a range of emotions.

Foster carers quickly establish safe and reliable routines, which aid children's and young people's feelings of safety and security. Younger children swiftly learn that the adults around them can be trusted to make safe and consistent decisions. For example, foster carer couples give the same messages and expectations, in line with good parenting, about attending school, bed times and eating healthy meals. Older young people are sensitively reminded about their growing responsibilities as they approach adulthood, particularly with regard to the consequences of the decisions they make. Children and young people are learning valuable lessons about the impact and responsibility of their behaviour.

They are also learning about their own interests and skills as well as developing aspirations. Foster carers diligently explore children's and young people's hobbies and interests in order to ensure that they have access to a wide range of healthy, fun and appropriate pastimes. Examples include joining a local football club, the purchase of an abundance of musical equipment, playing out with newly made friends and a voluntary animal-care work placement that may lead to a paid part-time job. One child was proud and delighted to showcase his football medals and certificates, while another young person expertly demonstrated the written care regime that they have designed and put in place for their hamster. Children and young people are developing self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Creative advertising campaigns are reaching a wide range of potential foster carers from diverse communities and backgrounds. This fits with the agency's own statement of purpose described on the website, which focuses on wanting individuals and couples representative from different sectors of faiths, ethnicities, lifestyles, economic and social backgrounds. The number of initial enquiries currently being responded to is high and demonstrates that the recruitment strategy is working. Foster carers already working for the organisation say that they were attracted to this agency because of its not-for-profit status and that it has continued to demonstrate this commitment after they joined. Some carers have transferred from other agencies, and comments included, 'the mind-set is refreshing; the value base is all about the children' and, 'I am proud to work for such an organisation.'

Enquiries from prospective foster carers are effectively and systematically processed. Turnaround timescales are quick and effective. A good number of initial enquiries do not progress to the next stage because the applicants are not considered to reflect

the value base of the agency. Clear filtering processes lead to a timely assessment process which provides prospective foster carers with a realistic introduction to the fostering service and the agency's own particular ethos. This includes introductions to current foster carers who are heavily involved in the Skills to Foster programme.

The 'Secure Base' model is the foundation of prospective carers' initial introduction and training programmes. They are swiftly introduced to the challenges that they may face, alongside the support mechanisms that they can expect to receive from the agency. The inspectors' direct observation of this initial training and introduction found such processes to be informative, supportive and realistic for prospective foster carers. They are enabled and supported to make well informed decisions, as to whether to continue with their original enquiries to become foster carers with the agency. Staff who facilitate this training said, for example, 'it is important that all of us use this process to establish whether applicants are right for us and vice versa.'

The assessments of foster carers are conducted in a timely manner by qualified and experienced social workers, some of whom are independently commissioned. These assessments are usually completed to a good standard and demonstrate a rigorous approach. Due to the small size of the agency, there are examples of permanent staff, such as the new manager, undertaking a range of tasks, including assessing, supervising carers and overseeing other people's work. This practice compromises the necessary independence to ensure objectivity. This is recognised in the agency's business and development plan, and a recruitment campaign for additional permanent staff is planned to address this.

Foster carers are integral to referral, matching and care-planning processes. Their input is highly valued by the agency and other professionals. Careful matching methods minimise the risk of making unsuitable placements. For example, some children and young people are placed with two full-time carers in recognition of their complex needs. One such foster carer said, 'we work as a team and complement each other.' Experienced single carers are fully aware of their own skills and limitations. This has resulted in turning down referrals in the best interest of children and young people and accepting those where there is every chance of a successful placement. One foster carer said, 'I'm not interested in providing another failed placement in a child's life. My biggest kick is seeing them become successful.'

Recent staffing changes have been unsettling for foster carers, but they confirm that their support and supervision continue to be regular and helpful. The new manager recognises shortfalls with the current recording tool, and is developing an improved version to capture foster carers' learning and development needs and achievements better. Supervision is used to reflect on children's and young people's progress and to review the strategies being used to manage situations and behaviour. Fostering households with two carers are sometimes better placed to meet the emerging and changing needs of children than those with single carers, for example when a child or young person is out of school. This is another factor leading to the recommendation for the agency to review its current staffing levels as additional staff could provide further support to single carers.

All foster carers either have completed the training, support and development

standards in foster care or are on course to do so. Some foster carers bring previous fostering experience. In such cases, their knowledge and expertise is being fully utilised to provide peer support and guidance. One foster carer has designed an excellent information gathering tool which is to be disseminated to others. Such practice typifies the collaborative approach of all members of the agency.

Foster carers know the children and young people extremely well. They speak fondly of them, and the relationships observed during home visits were warm, loving and respectful. Foster carers accurately describe why and how they are providing safe, nurturing care, derived from close partnership working with children's social workers. Statements from placing social workers include, 'they are working to the care plan to the letter, providing thoughtful and nurturing care within a complex set of circumstances.' Such comments reflect the commitment and dedicated approach of foster carers in making placements work. Consequently, no disruptions have occurred.

Children and young people are thriving. Their progress and happiness is clearly linked to the proactive approach of foster carers in securing meaningful support services, and establishing hobbies and activities. Foster carers are strong advocates, with particular regard to the quality of the education services in place for their children and young people. Two separate examples demonstrate rigorous challenge to a school and private tuition provider. Other examples show foster carers providing extensive time and energy to support children's and young people's attendance at alternative tutoring provisions and therapy sessions, often travelling long distances to maintain these important appointments. One foster carer said, 'it would be easier to switch to more local provision, but the relationship was already established before they came to us, and it would be further disruption for our young person.' Superb examples demonstrate how foster carers encourage and support children's and young people's developing personalities and interests. For some, their talents for sport and music are being actively encouraged, while others are learning about taking responsibility through having a pet.

Panel members are recruited from a range of relevant backgrounds. Many have extensive panel experience and the central list continues to grow. Good-quality meeting minutes demonstrate a rigorous approach in making recommendations, for example by challenging and changing an assessor's approval recommendation. Further close scrutiny is demonstrated by the agency decision maker who is suitably separate from the panel and able to show clear and methodical thinking in producing well-reasoned decisions. He also provides clear feedback to the agency about the quality of the assessments, but this practice is not consistently demonstrated by the panel. This restricts the agency's ability to learn from constructive feedback. Some relevant training has been attended by a number of panel members. Due to new members joining, the panel chair is conducting a timely review of members' individual and collective training needs to inform their appraisal process reliably.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Requires improvement

Children and young people report feeling confident that they are being kept safe by their foster carers. One younger child explained this by saying, 'I'm only allowed to play out where they can see me,' and an older teenager said, 'they talk to me about internet stuff and social media.' Such examples reflect foster carers' educative style which is age-appropriate and in line with children's understanding. Foster carers set clear boundaries and expectations, which reinforce feelings of being cared about. Comments included, 'it's all about having the ongoing discussions with them; showing them you care enough to find out what they're up to' and, 'children often think they can handle anything and are fearless. My job is to convince them otherwise!'

Some young people have previously engaged in risk taking behaviour, or are vulnerable to potential harm from external factors and influences. Safe and carefully constructed supervision levels protect their safety and welfare, for example by placing some young people in households with two full-time foster carers. In such a case, foster carers were reported by placing authorities as, 'following the care plan to the letter to ensure their safety.' Other foster carers fully appreciate that their role is to take measured risks, which allow children and young people to learn from making mistakes sometimes. Such practice enables children and young people to grow in confidence and to develop emotional maturity. One young person said, 'I used to be really scared of doing things on my own, but I kind of like it now.' While such examples enable personal growth and development, some situations and decisions are not always fully captured by risk management or safe care plans. This leaves foster carers potentially vulnerable, should a serious incident occur. A recommendation is made to ensure that systems are in place to encourage appropriate and managed risk taking to continue.

Foster carers and staff are provided with detailed safeguarding and child protection policies. These cover a wide range of associated topics, including physical restraint, whistle blowing, extremism and radicalisation, missing, sexual exploitation. However, due to the sheer volume, content and separation of these policies, there is a risk of the actual procedural guidance foster carers and staff should implement being lost. The new manager recognises this potential shortfall and is currently reviewing all such guidance. Her primary focus is to improve how foster carers and staff are guided on what to do, when and how. This responsive approach is particularly timely, while the agency is small enough to capture the current foster carers and staff team effectively, and for such changes to be in place ready to inform newcomers.

A strong emphasis is placed upon working together with associated safeguarding agencies. Senior staff maintain good links and ongoing dialogue with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB). Recent consultations with the local area designated officer with regards to staff conduct demonstrate open and transparent practice which serves to protect foster carers, children and young people.

The behaviour management systems implemented by foster carers fully reflect the ethos and aims of the agency. In line with their ongoing Secure Base training, foster

carers are wholeheartedly concerned with rewarding positive conduct and understanding why and how children's and young people's behaviours are influenced by their past experiences. Physical intervention training is provided, but to date has not been used. Neither have there been any incidents of children being absent or missing. Examples of feedback from children and young people included, 'I like being here', and 'my foster carers really listen to me'. A confident and competent foster carer said: 'my young person is testing the boundaries by swearing, shouting and leaving the house in a dramatic fashion. I am very clear about when, why and how I might need to enlist the help of others, but I'm also clear that they need to vent their frustration and anger in a safe space, and that place is here.' Another foster carer is currently engaged in a professional yet challenging dialogue with their child's school. While they accept that their child's behaviour can be difficult to manage on occasion, they are also advocating that a different behaviour management approach is adopted.

New senior staff members are suitably experienced safeguarding professionals, but neither the manager nor the assistant director has joined the agency with up-to-date safer recruitment training, this is now planned. The agencies recruitment practice, before these individuals came into post, was generally sound. However there were some examples of recruitment practice, which was not fully consistent with best-practice guidance. Examples include the type and nature of Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks for panel members, and an employee's reference not being robustly verified. It is therefore recommended that senior managers complete safer recruitment training and conduct a review of previous appointments, leading to appropriate remedial action, to ensure that the recruitment of all staff is consistently robust.

Children and young people live in safe and secure households. Form F assessment procedures diligently explore the capacity of prospective carers to provide such an environment. This includes rigorous reference checks of prospective foster carers, the evaluative exploration of how their own past experiences may influence their parenting styles, and how they will keep children and young people safe. However, the agency's procedures for logging when relevant health and safety checks of foster carer's homes are made, and are therefore due for renewal, are not clear. It is recommended that the agency takes appropriate action to monitor health and safety checks and procedures conducted by foster carers, particularly as some are approaching their first anniversary and are therefore due for renewal.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Following the departure of the registered manager in July 2015, the agency halted its recruitment of new foster carers to focus on advertising for a replacement manager and to maintain the stability of current placements. The responsible individual describes utilising this period to review the agency business and development plans and stated, 'we wanted to feel more secure before taking on more carers and young

people'. This review period resulted in key changes to the senior management structure of the agency.

A new manager is now in post. At the time of this inspection, her application to be registered with Ofsted was underway. She brings a wealth of social work and fostering experience, complemented by relevant qualifications. Immediate shortfalls, in respect of management qualifications have already been recognised with appropriate action underway. An assistant director joined at the same time, and two additional directors were also undergoing recruitment checks. The strategic management and financial stability of the agency is being strengthened. The agency is currently receiving a high number of initial enquiries from prospective foster carers, and a number of assessments are underway.

As a consequence of this increased activity, the five established fostering households are being supported by the new manager and assistant director. Both are qualified and experienced fostering social workers. Independent qualified social workers are also being commissioned to undertake initial assessment work and a planned next step is for the agency to recruit a permanent supervising social worker. Foster carers say that they have continued to receive regular supervision, good-quality support and out-of-hours advice during the changes.

While expansion plans are clear, the current demands on the new manager are potentially conflicting. Performing a range of roles risks compromising independence and objectivity. It also lessens the time that she has to dedicate to key management tasks, such as the reviewing and updating of procedural guidance, which she is keen to tackle. Similarly, some of the independent social workers are also undertaking a range of tasks, which are not always clearly captured within their written contractual agreements, such as assessing, reviewing and providing out-of-hours support. Consequently, lines of responsibility and accountability risk becoming blurred. A requirement is made to bring clarity to the roles and responsibilities of all those working for the agency. Induction procedures for recently appointed staff have covered a wide range of relevant topics, but these have been completed at speed. This approach affects the quality of a meaningful induction and probationary process. A requirement is made to review this practice.

Current and prospective foster carers give excellent feedback about their introduction to the fostering task. They talk about being very well prepared and largely attribute this to the 'Secure Base' training programme. Comments from current foster carers and those undergoing assessment included, 'it's so informative and makes you really evaluate how you parent', and 'we made a decision to continue with our application to foster because of the quality of the information provided. No holds barred. It's been enlightening.' Current foster carers confirm that their own supervision sessions focus heavily upon the quality of the care that they are providing and the impact of their skills and continuing development needs upon the children and young people in their care. The agency is currently transferring all of its records and data collection to the CHARMS system, and this is being used to improve the quality and content of foster carers' supervision records and personal development plans. Some foster carers say that they do not like using a prescribed scoring system to monitor and record children's and young people's progress. Their comments included, 'such

methods are too sanitised and don't allow for context to be described.' The agency is responsive to feedback and is reviewing this element. This response typifies the value that the agency places upon comments from all its stakeholders. It also recognises the additional skills and experiences of foster carers, and ways in which these can be utilised to help others. For example, one foster carer is preparing to deliver a presentation on monitoring children's and young people's safe internet use, and another is to share her excellent filing and information-gathering system.

Following a number of changes, the statement of purpose has been updated and remains under review as new employees are joining. Placing social workers confirm that its stated aims and objectives are being delivered. Their comments included, 'I have been very impressed by my experiences so far', and 'my young person is thriving, in accordance with the nurturing approach described. The carers see the child and not the background history.' Clear admissions procedures hold placing authorities to account because they are rigorously implemented. In one case relevant information was not immediately forthcoming which resulted in the agency closing the referral. The responsible individual stated, 'we will not make a placement that is likely to fail. Neither will we knowingly risk adding to a young person's experience of placement breakdowns.'

There are no previous requirements or recommendations to follow because this is the first inspection. However, senior managers demonstrated an open and receptive approach during this visit when emerging shortfalls were identified. One recent incident of concern was swiftly shared with the local authority and appropriately notified to Ofsted. The new manager is currently reviewing the existing monitoring systems to ensure that the ethos of being a reflective and learning agency becomes embedded.

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.