

St. Christopher's Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Diane Thackrah
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Responsible individual	
Date of last inspection	1 January 1900

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

St Christopher's Fostering is an Independent fostering agency whose aim is to offer high quality family placements to children who are looked after by local authorities and to provide opportunities for them to achieve their full potential. The agency forms part of a wider national voluntary organisation that provides services to children, young people and vulnerable adults. The agency has its main administrative branch in Mitcham, south London with a separate office in Southend-on-Sea. The agency was registered with Ofsted in February 2007.

Summary

This was an announced key inspection where all key National Minimum Standards have been inspected. The inspectors spoke to a number of staff, attended a panel at the Mitcham Office, visited four foster carers and inspected records. In addition questionnaires were sent to foster carers, young people and placing social workers.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The service has recruited to all vacant posts and the registered manager reports that there is now a clear strategy for developing the service. Staff members feel that the service is more 'settled' with clear lines of accountability and good management support. The Registered Manager reports that the training programme has been developed and improved and that this has helped carers to understand their roles better. Plans are in place for the relocation of the Mitcham office. A new office has been secured that is reported to have disability access and to be closer to public transport links.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The service has good systems in place for promoting the health and development of children. The service obtains relevant information about children's health needs prior to placements being made. Good systems are in place for chasing this information up from placing local authorities when it is not provided. Foster carers think that the service provides them with the information they need about children's health. Foster carers are clear of their responsibility for registering children with a doctor and dentist. The service also supports foster carers to access specialist services for children and ensures that each child has a health plan which is updated regularly. The service has access to a medical consultant and consultant psychiatrist. Training is provided to both foster carers and staff members in first aid and hygiene issues. Training is also offered on a variety of health related issues. Foster carers are required to keep the service up to date about children's health needs in weekly reports.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The service is well run and managed. All staff members and foster carers undergo thorough vetting prior to working with children. Children live in comfortable and safe homes that provide them with adequate space and privacy. There is clear information available in the foster carer's

handbook about the requirements for children's health, safety and comfort in the home. There is a sound matching process that aims to ensure that each child is carefully matched with a carer capable of meeting their needs. Matching is carried out following a needs assessment and there is good record keeping in this area. Matching takes into account children's needs in relation to race, culture, ethnicity and religious and cultural background. There are good systems in place for ensuring that children's cultural needs are catered for where there are trans-racial placements. A social care professional commented 'They are really clued up on the customs of ethnic minority groups.' There are good arrangements for protecting children from abuse. The service has sound policies and procedures in this area and all staff members and foster carers are made aware of these. Training in child protection and issues of abuse form part of the induction process for staff members and foster carers, and is ongoing. Foster carers are given information about acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour management. Allegations of abuse are taken seriously and reported to the appropriate authorities. There is a clear written recruitment process and now good arrangements for checking the suitability of people working within the service. Some staff members have, in the past, been employed with gaps in employment history. This practice does not fully protect the well-being of foster children. Social work staff have the appropriate qualifications and experience to carry out their jobs well. Feedback from foster carers is that they receive a professional service from social workers. One carer commented that they received 'Excellent support, and excellent service that is always improving.' There is an efficient and effective panel that serves to promote and protect the well being of children. There are clear policies and procedures in place regarding the functions of the panel. Panel members are experienced and knowledgeable about their role as panel members. Thorough recruitment checks are carried out on all panel members. There are independent panel members and members who have experience of being in foster care. There is currently no panel member with a medical background, however, the agency has a medical advisor. The registered manager has stated her intentions to seek out a panel member who has medical expertise.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service ensures that children are provided with foster care where diversity is valued and equality promoted. The service is committed to ensuring that all individual aspects of young people's lives are met. Anti discriminatory practice is evident throughout the agency. There are policies relating to equality, trans-racial and trans-cultural placements and the agency provides support to children and carers where there are trans-racial or trans cultural placements to ensure each child's placement meets their individual needs. Training in equality and diversity is provided to staff members and foster carers. Children's education is seen as important and children are encouraged to meet their full potential. Foster carers feel that they are given good support by the service regarding education. One foster carer commented 'I have been fully supported regarding my foster child's education.' Foster carers confirm that they are required to be involved in the assessment of children's educational needs and contribute to personal educational plans. One foster carer said that they read with their foster child each evening. Clear and comprehensive records are maintained of children's educational progress, needs and achievements. A foster child commented 'My teacher, foster carer and social worker help me with education.' Clear policies and procedures are in place regarding short term breaks.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service enables children to maintain contact with their family members where this is appropriate. There are clear records regarding contact on children's files and foster carers feel that they have all the information they need regarding contact arrangements. Contact arrangements are reviewed on a regular basis and information about contact is shared with relevant professionals. Children's views about contact are sought and valued. There are good systems in place for ensuring that foster carers and foster children have a say in the way that the service is run. Foster carers are clear about the importance of listening to children. One foster carer said 'We are encouraged to discuss decision making with the children so they are involved in their wellbeing.' A foster child said 'I am listened to by my foster carer and I get cuddles when I need one.' Another foster child said 'I feel supported and wanted.' Review reports indicate that children's views are taken into account regarding their care. Interpreters are used to support children to share their views. There is a child friendly guide to the service that details how complaints can be made by children, and how advocates can be contacted. One foster child said 'I got a booklet from St Christopher's about making complaints and can talk about my problems with my foster Carers.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The service ensures that children are helped to develop skills, competence and knowledge for independent living. Foster carers are provided with the information and support they need to prepare young people leaving care for independent living.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose that clearly states the aims and objectives of the service. This is kept under review. A children's guide is also available which includes a summary of what the service sets out to do. These documents can be made available on request. Policies and procedures accurately reflect the service's Statement of Purpose. There are clear procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service and ensuing quality performance. Foster carers report that they are happy with the financial arrangements in place. There is a well qualified and experienced staff team who demonstrate a commitment to meeting the needs of children using the service. One child commented 'St Christopher's are great and funny.' All feedback received from foster carers was positive. There has been a number of organisational changes recently. Staff members report that these have been for the better of the service. Staffing levels have been down for the past year, however, two vacant supporting social worker positions have recently been recruited to. Staff members report that they receive good support and guidance from the management team and that there are clear lines of accountability within the organization. Clerical support is good. All staff members receive formal supervision which they report is useful. Regular team meetings occur and all staff members receive a yearly appraisal. There are generally good arrangements for staff members and foster carers' training and development. Training provides them with the skills and information needed to provide good care to children. Not all staff members have received induction training. Foster carers think that they are well supported by the service. One carer commented that the service 'provides sound advice, support groups and training. Training is regular and there is an annual review to assess my needs and skills. I feel that St Christopher's continually strive to improve the service they provide.' There is a clear working strategy for supporting foster carers. This includes training, support groups, an out of hours service, information and advice and respite care.

Training focuses on safeguarding and promoting positive outcomes for children. Annual reviews include an appraisal of training. Supporting social workers visit carers regularly and provide good support. Communication between the service and foster carers is good. Children's records are clear, comprehensive and well maintained. There is a clear policy in place regarding case recording and staff members and foster carers are clear about their responsibilities for keeping records up to date and confidential. Foster carers are encouraged and supported to keep appropriate memorabilia for children in order to help them reflect on and understand their history. The service has good systems in place for maintaining good records regarding staff, foster carers, complaints and allegations. Regular file audits are carried out in order to monitor the quality of records.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
15	ensure that a full employment history is obtained, in writing, from any staff member, prior to them commencing work for the service. (Regulation 20 (3)(d)(i)(Schedule 1))	1 December 2008
19	ensure that all new staff members undergo induction training. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	1 December 2008

Recommendations

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

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.