

Cornerstone North East Fostering Service

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Jacqueline Malcolm
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Registered person Cornerstone (North East) Adoption and Fostering Service
Registered manager Mrs Pamela Birtle
Responsible individual Mrs Nadine Parker
Date of last inspection 17/03/2012

Service information

Brief description of the service

Cornerstones (North East) Fostering Service is an independent fostering agency. The agency provides long-term and permanent family placements that may lead to adoption for children with foster carers who have a practicing Christian faith background.

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**

The new Registered Manager was appointed in November 2014. She has a long credible history with this service and is ambitious and enthusiastic for it to succeed. An experienced Responsible Individual is six months into the post. Although supportive to the Registered Manager, they are not fully conversant with the plans for the service. After several years of financial difficulties, the service is financially viable for a further 12 months. However, the service has been slow to grow, due to a number of wider leadership issues. For example, the Registered Manager is performing other roles which distracts from the speed that at which the agency could develop. The children's good care, high morale and professional support in the fostering agency have not been affected.

On the contrary, children's life chances significantly improve due to the care, support and protection they receive in loving and nurturing fostering families. Children's health, education, behavioural and social outcomes are good. A major strength is the relationship between the fostering agency and foster carers. This enables children to live as non-intrusive a family life as possible. Specifically, good matching is sensitive

to children’s needs and over time supports them to develop and maintain safe, reliable attachments with their foster carers. A number of foster placements have progressed into adoption. The model of care that the fostering agency seeks to promote are for ‘forever families’. This shows that the fostering agency is committed to meeting children’s long-term futures. Their track record for supporting children into adulthood meets their objectives as set out in the Statement of Purpose.

Children are safe. They are listened to and their views count. However, their views and those of foster carers and other stakeholders are not evaluated when the Registered Manager undertakes service reviews. Children’s diverse needs are well met by foster carers who are robustly recruited and well trained. This enables them to provide children with the best possible care, which leads to their improved outcomes. An independently chaired panel is sufficiently informed about the suitability of potential foster carers through scrutiny of assessments presented to them. This enables panel to challenge and make well informed recommendations to the agency decision maker. This quality assurance process keeps children safe.

Foster carers speak highly about the support and training they receive from the fostering agency. They are treated as part of the ‘team around the child’ and effectively communicate with the fostering agency and other professionals. This promotes high quality care practices. Foster carer’s contributions are valued by the fostering agency and the information shared help interested parties to understand the child’s journey. Allegations made against carers are quickly resolved, which is in children’s best interests. However, the lack of access to an independent person may contribute to their sense of isolation during such difficult times. Partnerships between the fostering agency and other professional stakeholders are generally good. That said; this does not prevent the fostering agency from challenging external agencies that are slow to deliver on information. This is an issue that the Registered Manager continues to address.

The shortfalls identified at this inspection have no impact on safeguarding or promoting children’s welfare.

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
The Registered Manager must maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless in the case of a fostering agency which is	30/09/2015

<p>a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35(1)(b)(3))</p>	
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Recommendations

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

During an investigation the fostering service makes support, which is independent of the fostering service, available to the person subject to the allegation and, where this is a foster carer, to their household, in order to provide:

- a. information and advice about the process;
- b. emotional support; and,
- c. if needed, mediation between the foster carer and the fostering service and/or advocacy (including attendance at meetings and panel hearings). (NMS 22.12)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children benefit from very settled and secure placements. Their attachments with their foster carers are strong. This is made possible due to some exceedingly good transitional arrangements that children experience when they move into fostering families. This provides the firm foundations that measurably improve their life chances. Most children are well matched with foster carers who are dedicated to making a lifelong commitment to them, treating them like their own kin. Carers are fully involved in robust introductions with children and all relevant people involved in the child's life. For example, social workers, parents and previous carers. Children are given age appropriate information, which is provided by the fostering agency, which seeks to inform and minimise any distress. This includes, 'talking books', consisting of information in words and pictures about their prospective carers and what they can offer them. Children benefit from majorly well informed carers who have gained the desired knowledge and skills to ensure their holistic needs are fully met. This is congruent with their placement plans. However, not all foster carers felt that they were fully appraised before a child was placed. The presenting challenges were addressed by the fostering agency and the strategies put in place enabled the child's needs to be fully met.

Children are lovingly nurtured by adults who are fully committed to providing them with a 'forever family'. This is a concept that the fostering agency strongly advocate and is proud of attaining, as evidenced in the number of subsequent adoptions. An agency representative described the service as, 'a permanent model of care where 75% of all placements have moved to adoption. The forever family aspect is key to our success and is reflected in children not adopted changing their names by deed poll. This is also seen in our model on respite.' These factors significantly help children to settle into family life, feel safe and valued as a member of the family. A young adult cared for by the same family since childhood said, 'It feels like a good, normal family' and 'I have had an excellent time in (name of the agency).' A foster carer said, 'This is their home.'

Children are helped to express their wishes and feelings. An agency representative said, (name of the agency) ensures that the children's voice are heard during their looked after review and the social workers build good relationship with the children communicating and listening,' and 'All seven children and young people are central to their care planning and reviews. They have opportunity in a person centred and age/ability appropriate way to give feedback on the care they receive within their fostering family. They can do this verbally or using a consultation paper. The families are all supported to actively engage the children and young people in decision making about their current and future choices. We have some excellent examples of this'. Children have been empowered to express positive views about living with their foster carers, choosing to share bedrooms with siblings and deciding on activities. Children's involvement in their carer's annual review is facilitated by them completing the child friendly forms, which for some children serve as a fun opportunity to express their creativity through drawings and pictures.

Their contact with social workers, independent reviewing officers and representatives from the fostering agency provide further avenues for children to talk to people outside of their household. Children feel listened to when they are treated with respect and this helps them build their confidence and resilience.

Childhoods are fiercely protected from threats related to offending behaviour, drug abuse, going missing or being sexually exploited. An agency representative said, 'In 16 years to the best of my knowledge the agency has had no child who has needed to be reported as missing who actually was missing. Several young people have been reported by their carers when they have failed to return home at their appointed time. The carers are fully aware of the need to ring the on call social worker in such an event. This has not occurred in the past four years. There has only been one young person who was at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE). This was reported to the police and appropriate plans put in place to ensure her safety and protection. She was 13 years old at the time. She is now 22, living independently but in constant contact with her previous carers and at university studying to be a teacher.' Foster carer's awareness is enhanced through training. A professional from the fostering agency said, 'Ongoing training covers issues such as CSE internet/social media safety and bullying.' Children are considerably safer because their carers instil clear boundaries and strategies when they are confronted with challenging behaviours. This promotes consistency and when incidents have occurred, children may choose their sanction. Positively, no children have been restrained, which shows that their behaviour is safely managed. A carer said, 'we use the time-out step. I now let him choose his sanctions and he is involved in this. If we had to hold him, it would be due to immediate danger – we haven't had to.' These positive interventions have led to some positive outcomes. One carer said, 'Before, it would have all been about him, but now he has learnt to share and appreciate others.'

Children's physical, psychological and emotional health needs are promptly supported through their good engagement with primary and specialist health care services. Healthy living, such as good nutrition and exercise are actively encouraged. An agency representative said, (name of service) 'have had many children with physical and emotional needs and carers have been well-supported in seeking appropriate care for them both medical, educational and psychological.' Carer's training in relevant health related matters enables them to competently care for all children, including those with complex health needs. As a result, children's health outcomes significantly improve; they are meeting their milestones and physically thrive. Specifically, children with health concerns, such as vision, speech and language difficulties experience good outcomes. This improves their current and future quality of life. A social worker said, 'The child placed receives a very high level of care from her carers. They have a high level of complex needs requiring hands on care and frequent medical review. I have no concerns in relation to the carer's ability to respond to their needs.' A foster carer said, 'He has put weight on and grown, we have seen him physically change.' Children accessing therapeutic services have enjoyed longstanding trusting relationships with the fostering agency's play therapist. This has spanned from childhood into adulthood. Their continued commitment has been vital in emotionally preparing those young adults towards the next part of their journey. A young adult recalls that the therapist 'Has

been there for me from day one.'

Children's educational potential is nurtured and promoted, which supports their regular attendance and good progress. Carer's training and effective involvement with the fostering agency secures the best educational outcomes. A stakeholder said, 'Training on the Education of Looked after Children (LAC) is given and carers are encouraged to take a full role in the education of children. They attend LAC reviews, PEP/EHC meetings, work with virtual schools, attend parent's evenings and any other activities that promote their child in placement's learning and development.' Children's progress and any concerns are discussed with education providers to help counter any barriers, ensuring they remain on track. Children of all ages have a lot to feel proud of as their achievements speak for themselves. For example, a child with complex special needs and a life limited health condition graduated from nursery, complete with cap and gown. One young person was in the highest achieving group and his peers voted them on the school council. Children are making friends in school which helps them to develop social skills. Those young adults who are staying put in fostering families are in further education. They are progressing well and reaching their goals. One young person who received an unconditional place at university said they thought going to university was out of their league. Another said about college life, 'I love it! It's like my dream come true. I love the teachers, love em to bits.'

Children's access to various extra-curricular leisure and recreational activities introduces them to new interests and a lot of fun and happy times. This improves their self-esteem and health. Included are days out and holidays with their foster carers, celebrating birthdays with friends, exceeding in sporting activities and partaking in charity and church events. Summer parties held over two consecutive years bring together older young people and young adults previously fostered and adopted. These are well attended events that serve as a consistent reminder of children's lifelong status within this family focussed service.

Children's contact with family members and significant others are facilitated in accordance with their relevant plans and court orders. This helps them to maintain existing relationships with the important people in their lives and positively identify with their heritage. Where contact is prohibited, the support received by foster carers ensures alternative contact, which is very good. For example, children have drawn pictures, hand paintings, footprints and photos to send to their parents. Foster carer's update parents on their children's progress, which keeps them informed and up to date.

Children's engagement in ethnically and age appropriate life story interactions help them to understand their histories. Foster carers are trained to ensure they utilise their skills effectively to help children develop their identity, self confidence and self-worth. A representative from the agency said, 'Foster carers do life story work training and are supported to help the children alongside their (local authority social worker) to understand their story. We offer play and filial therapy to support children as needed as part of their care plan.' In addition, culturally appropriate books given to foster carers by supervising social workers support children to feel proud of who they are with the help of positive role models.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering agency specifically recruits Christian families who want to foster. As stated in the Statement of Purpose, it aims to, 'Meet the needs of young people and children who need planned long-term placements,' and intends to, 'Continue to develop an expertise in providing and supporting the placement of single children, those with complex needs and sibling groups into a 'forever family.' This is a concept of permanence that extends beyond the children's or young people's time in care.' This is endorsed by an agency representative who said, '(name of the agency) have had many children with physical and emotional needs and carers have been well supported in seeking appropriate care for them both medical, educational and psychological.'

The fostering agency has recruited a modest number of foster carers. They are carefully matched with children who have experienced social and emotional turbulence. This results in strong placement stability. Furthermore, the unconditional positive regard shown by foster carers towards children strengthens this assertion. The robust recruitment and vetting system ensures that only suitable foster carers are selected, that is, to provide children with their fundamental right to a loving, caring and stable family life. Those individuals that have raised concerns through the recruitment process are responded to through the appropriate safeguarding mechanisms. This protects children's sensibilities.

The preparation, assessment, support and training of potential foster carers is majorly good. Time is spent with potential foster carers talking about fostering and applicants are invited to attend the foster training programme ahead of their formal assessment. The training covers a number of child focussed issues. This is endorsed in the documentation kept by the agency and stakeholders. One said, 'Foster carers complete Skills to Foster training where safer caring, safeguarding and health and safety are introduced. Following a thorough and robust assessment and approval process they undergo induction training which again includes a more detailed look at the above topics and Paediatric First Aid Training is given. Ongoing training covers issues such as CSE internet/social media safety and bullying. They have a Foster Carer handbook which includes lots of helpful information as well as all of the essential policies and procedures.' The quality of assessments in more recent times has improved on analysis and evaluation and shows the rationale for potential carer's suitability. A comment from a panel representative described the assessments as 'very, very good.'

Children benefit from a well organised and chaired fostering panel. Good scrutiny is provided through the agency decision making function. This provides a good quality assurance mechanism when assessments are placed before them. This empowers panel members to make timely recommendations and give reasons so that decisions are made in children's best interests. Panel members are well established

and the members are not afraid to challenge or ask questions. Panel members are actively encouraged to participate in panel proceedings. This ensures that their views count, irrespective of whether information relates to a foster carer's approval, reviews or deregistration. The administration of panel is efficient and timely. This enables panel members to arrive at meetings well prepared. The agency decision maker, who recently observed panel for quality assurance purposes, confirmed their overall satisfaction with panel. They said that panel handle matters with, 'Common sense' and 'No-one has more credence than anyone else' and they, 'Hold each other to account.' Access to training and appraisals ensure that panel members keep up to date with their knowledge and development. Since the last inspection, a couple of new panel members have been recruited to the central list and the Registered Manager seeks to further diversify the group.

Foster carers speak very highly about the training they receive to support how they care for children. However, not all foster carers have felt suitably trained due to lack of information afforded to them during the early stages of the placement. This was not the fault of the fostering agency and has since been resolved. One carer, impressed by the training over the years said that the fostering agency, 'Wiped the floor' in comparison to other providers. Another said, 'They care about the foster carers and tailor training around our gap in skills and knowledge.' Training is planned to cover foster carer's availability. Included are weekend courses that also double up as fun social occasions where the whole fostering community, including the children, mix learning with the good times. These supportive factors sufficiently inform foster carers to develop the confidence to skilfully manage children's needs and behaviours. Their development is further enhanced by their attainment or plans to complete a recognised qualification.

A major strength of the fostering agency is their exceptionally good relationships with foster carers. Their non-intrusive approach enables children to enjoy a non-stigmatising, stable family life where they are clearly thriving. The monthly supervising social work visits take place with additional meetings as required. This includes unannounced visits, which is good safeguarding practice. The visits are well structured, supportive and interactive. One agency stakeholder said, 'On visits, the relationships with carers is positive, healthy and happy.' Foster carers have opportunities to focus on children's progress and they can reflect on their role. Any concerns or issues that may impede on the children's progress are openly discussed. This promotes children's safety and welfare and effects change. A carer said, 'The support is first class.' Another said, 'They are supportive and understanding, and have an intense interest in the foster carers and in the children who will be placed, to ensure a great outcome for all parties.'

Foster carers are highly valued as part of the mutually supportive, 'team around the child'. They communicate effectively with the fostering agency and with other professionals, such as social workers and independent reviewing officers, which promotes high quality care for children. A panel member said that the fostering agency provides, 'Very personal service for everyone concerned. An ethos of working together to support children to achieve the best possible outcomes and good support for foster carers.' Where issues arise, such as delays in placement information, the fostering agency and foster carers are not averse to challenging

the agencies that do not promptly respond to issues of concern. Some of these matters are still in need of action. The Registered Manager is aware of her responsibility to escalate her concerns when all other strategies have failed.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children's safety and welfare needs are highly prioritised and effectively integrated into the fostering agency's infrastructure. A representative from the agency said, 'Foster carers with (name of the agency) manage very well the difficult to place children who come to them on a permanent basis and manage to keep them safe.' Recruitment checks on the suitability of staff, carer's and panel members are thoroughly scrutinised and handled with sufficient rigour. Panel procedures have helped to prevent unsuitable people from having contact with children. In one safeguarding incident, the fostering agency, following the outcome of checks, reported their concerns to the appropriate professionals, such as local authority designated officer (LADO). This allows for effective working together practices that keep children safe.

Young adults who are 'staying put' with their carers confirm they feel safe. One said, 'I have always felt safe here', whilst another indicated that they grew to feel safe over time.

Allegations against carers are quickly notified to the appropriate authorities, including Ofsted. They are quickly dealt with. Although foster carers are aware of the potential for allegations to be made against them; the lack of access to an independent person for emotional support, advice and advocacy may contribute to their sense of isolation during such difficult times.

Foster carers safeguarding awareness is realised during their induction and subsequent safeguarding training. This helps them to recognise and act on the different forms of abuse. This reinforces the importance of safeguarding children that foster carer's embrace. Supervision and support to foster carers, including unannounced home visits provide additional measures that protect all involved in the welfare of children.

Children's vulnerabilities are protected by good, up to date risk management strategies and safe care practices. A professional stakeholder said, 'I have no concerns in relation to this and have had access to the risk assessments in relation to the child that I review. I can confirm that the assessment was both appropriate to their needs and thorough.' A representative from the agency said, 'I am satisfied as I feel that I have got to know the carers. They are very proactive in their activities, they totally understand safe care, there is no tension there.' Foster carers are fully aware and sensitive to children's histories that may arise from previous abuse. They ensure that any presenting inappropriate behaviours are communicated with the fostering agency and strategies are fully implemented to effect change.

There have been no incidents of children going missing from home and there is no evidence that they are at risk of child sexual exploitation. Children are encouraged to take age appropriate risks. In the case of younger children, this is usually linked to their leisure activities with some risks leading to the occasional accident, which carer's appropriately act on in communication with the fostering agency.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children benefit from a good fostering service where staff, managers and panel members are suitably qualified experienced and supervised. These qualities enable them to effectively carry out their role and continue to invest in children's success. Most importantly, their common goal is to help children to exceed expectations. Supervising social workers are qualified and are themselves well seasoned foster carers. Staff report that they feel well supported and their supervision and training helps them in their role. Morale in the team is high and excellent working relationships enhance communication. Good performance management processes and appraisals are completed annually with staff and carers. This includes contributions from children and young people. Communication is very good between the fostering agency, staff and carers. A representative from the agency said, 'All information to and from the Trustees meetings are cascaded using this system. Carer and staff supervisions are well documented and these provide an opportunity for clear and recorded communication on all aspects of the relationship between the agency, the staff and carers. Case notes reflect a flow of communication which is needs led by the families as well as meeting statutory requirements. We produce newsletters for carers, Panel and supporters and meet socially as well as for training which are all opportunities for good communication'.

A new manager was appointed in November 2014. She is registered with Ofsted. The Registered Manager is suitably qualified and has significant relevant experience. Her longstanding history with the fostering agency makes her a credible person to steer improvements and she is highly regarded by members of the board of trustees and other colleagues. One agency representative described the Registered Manager as, 'Magnificent.' The Registered Manager is staunchly child focussed and wholeheartedly ambitious for the service to succeed. Although new foster carers have been recruited since the last inspection, developments have been slow to show fruition, firstly, due to the precarious financial difficulties that have hampered the organisation since 2005. This was identified as a deficiency at the last inspection. At this inspection, the fostering agency is financially viability for the next 12 months. A second issue relates to the Registered Manager performing a number of other roles which distracts from the speed that at which the agency could develop. This is being addressed through the recruitment of additional supervising social work personnel. Thirdly, wider leadership appears indecisive. Although supportive, the Responsible Individual who has been in their role for six months is not fully conversant with the future plans.

The Registered Manager has a system to review the quality of service. However,

the documentation lacks analysis and contains no evaluation of the views of children, young people and foster carers. Although these omissions do not present a risk to children's safety or welfare, it is not clear if consultation raises any prompts for the Registered Manager to improve the service. Nonetheless, factors, such as the small size of the fostering agency, strong placement stability and the Registered Manager's excellent, detailed knowledge of the children and foster carers enables her to confidently track their progress. This satisfies the Registered Manager that children have opportunities to experience the best possible outcomes in loving foster care households and she is directly responsive to any issues of concern.

Positively, requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection have been addressed. This means that Ofsted are notified of any child protection concerns. Safeguarding issues are effectively responded to in liaison with partner agencies and information relating to the financial viability of the service has been provided to Ofsted. Panel meeting minutes now include the reasons for recommendations and foster carers receive the training and development needed to effectively carry out their role. This demonstrates that the fostering agency has capacity to improve.

The Registered Manager has developed good working relationships with the placing authorities of the children placed with fostering families. She acknowledges that more needs to be done to proactively extend the marketing strategy to make placements with foster carer's waiting for placements. This is an area that is progressing and it is too early to say how effective these will be.

The Statement of Purpose and Children's guide are clear and age appropriate so all interested parties understand what to expect from the fostering agency. Practice supports the aims and objectives of the service and the documents are reviewed at appropriate intervals to ensure they remain current.

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. Inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.