

Capstone Foster Care (South West)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Capstone Foster Care (South West) Limited is part of Capstone Foster Care, an independent fostering agency with branches across the United Kingdom. The South West fostering agency's head office is based in Kingsteignton, Devon, with the other offices of this service located in Ringwood, Hampshire; Frome, Somerset; and Thornbury, Bristol.

This fostering service recruits, assesses and approves foster carers in the South West of England and provides emergency, short term and long term placements for children and young people, and assessment places for children and their parent(s). These include standard and therapeutic foster care placements, parent and child arrangements, sibling placements and placements for unaccompanied minors. The fostering agency's therapists, educational coordinator and qualified social pedagogues are available to support foster placements.

A the time of this inspection the fostering agency provided 135 fostering households with 130 children and young people in placement.

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 fostering agency demonstrates an outstanding commitment to supporting children and young people to make excellent progress and to achieve positive outcomes in their lives. The welfare, safety and consideration of the child's or young person's experience are central in all aspects of the agency's operation. High quality direct work is provided by the agency with children, young people and foster carers, delivered by a multi-disciplinary staff team that includes social workers, therapists, social pedagogues and an educational coordinator. This is resulting in exceptional progress being made by some children and young people, based on their starting points.

Matching processes are strong; great care is taken to only place children and young people whose individual needs foster carers are likely to be able to effectively meet. This means that many children and young people benefit from living in stable placements, including residing with their siblings. Children and young people feel secure and this helps them to develop safe and trusting relationships with others. Most importantly, they are happy in their placements and feel very much a part of their fostering family.

Foster carers are part of the professional team working with the child and they feel valued within this fostering agency. Well established recruitment, assessment, preparation and the regular supervision of each foster carer results in this agency being able to provide a range of skilled carers to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people placed. The foster carers' good knowledge base and their outstanding understanding of the children and young people they look after constructively informs planning and decision-making to benefit children and young peoples' futures.

Staff and foster carers are strong, effective advocates for the children and young people in placement. Their robust professional approach and challenge to ensuring children and young people receive the help and support they need means that they are not disadvantaged or suffer discrimination. This contributes to the agency's sound safeguarding practice and the promotion of very positive experiences and outcomes for individuals. Effective external working arrangements established with local professionals and safeguarding agencies robustly protect children and young people placed with the agency. Staff and foster carers receive good quality and regular supervision, training and developmental opportunities to support them in looking after children and young people well.

Leadership and management within the agency demonstrate innovation and a strong drive for improvement in outcomes for children and young people. The agency is one of six national demonstration and research sites involved in discovering how social pedagogic foster care could work in the United Kingdom in making a positive difference to the wellbeing of children and young people. Participation opportunities for foster carers and children and young people are increasing within the agency and their involvement enriches the development of care practices.

The registered persons are suitably qualified and experienced. The roles and

accountabilities of the Registered Manager and the responsible individual are clearly defined. However, the management structure in place does not result in effective management practice and oversight in all areas of the agency's work. Monitoring and quality assurance functions lack sufficient rigour in identifying shortfalls within the operation of the agency. This results in one breach of regulation; this is the failure of the agency to notify Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of significant events impacting on the lives of children and young people. This shortfall has the potential to weaken safeguarding and the promotion of children and young peoples' welfare. However, no negative impact on outcomes for children and young people were identified as a result of this breach.

Areas for 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.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
36 (2011)	ensure that if any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1))	28/11/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service (NMS 25.1)
- ensure that there is an effective system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed (NMS 26.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The child or young person's experiences are central to their care and are the focus of the support provided by the agency. Children and young people receive excellent, individualised care, designed to best meet each individual's unique needs. This supports them in their personal, social and educational development. Children and

young peoples' opinions about their care and futures are valued and taken into account in how they are looked after by their foster family. This helps them to feel listened to and to feel respected and included by their foster family. Children and young people are encouraged and very well supported to take part in planning for their futures, as is appropriate for their age and understanding. Their feelings of empowerment increase by having some ownership of their own destiny and from the positive responses that they receive from their involvement.

Children and young people say they feel comfortable and happy, and enjoy living in their foster homes. Each child or young person receives a personal profile of their foster family prior to their placement. This information helps them to feel more confident about moving into their foster homes, as they have some idea about what to expect in their new home. They are fully included in family life and they feel safe and secure. Those children and young people living in longer term placements, including remaining under Special Guardianship Orders or 'staying put' arrangements, feel particularly settled and very much a part of their fostering family. Their very positive comments include: 'I love being here'; 'I couldn't be anywhere better'; 'they know what I'm like'; and 'they couldn't do anymore for me than they already do.'

Their foster home provides a secure base for children and young people and contributes to helping them to learn to trust others and to develop secure primary attachments. Children and young people are successfully learning how to make and sustain relationships with new and past friends and with their families, in accordance with their care plans. This is crucial when the plan is for children and young people to return to live successfully within their birth families

Children and young people are becoming more able in dealing with challenges and set-backs. Carers support them to better understand their personal histories and difficulties and this helps them to move positively forward. Most children and young people are making significant improvements in their personal development as they grow up. They benefit from individualised, creative support they receive from their foster carers to help them move successfully towards adulthood and independent living. Besides learning practical self-care and independent living skills, young people benefit from enjoying a good balance of personal space and support. This enables them to successfully learn from their mistakes as they venture into new territories, for example, positively managing increased free time and forming safe relationships.

The positive regard children and young people are given by their foster carers and agency staff helps them to increase in confidence. This supports individuals to risk trying out new things, resulting in them developing their talents and abilities and widening their horizons. Children and young people take part in community leisure activities, groups and a wide range of stimulating hobbies and interests. Consequently, most are making outstanding progress, given their starting points. Moreover, some young people are making exceptional progress in their development. Examples include being head boy and chair of the school council; being nominated for a national humanitarian award; and saving a considerable amount of money from part-time working while at college to pay for motor-cycle insurance. Such success has helped to raise young peoples' self-esteem and supported them in developing

high aspirations for their futures.

At the time of this inspection, only one young person was not attending appropriate educational provision or employment. Levels of attendance are outstanding for the children and young people placed, given their starting points. Moreover, many children and young people are making significant progress in their educational achievements. For example, for the spring term 2014, 34% of children and young people achieved 100% attendance, and 72% achieved an attendance of 96% or above. 87% of children and young people were reported as being on track to attain their end of key stage target grade in English, and 93% were reported as on track in mathematics. Only two of three young people were not on track in both English and mathematics, and two of these have statements of special educational need.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This is a child-focused fostering agency, where the objective of providing positive experiences and good progress and development for all children and young people placed are pivotal in all aspects of its operation. The agency provides a range of diverse services for children and young people, including offering placements to children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour. Feedback gathered from commissioners and social workers about the quality of care provided is extremely positive. Professionals identified sustained improvement in the lives of children and young people. Excellent matching and the close monitoring of children and young peoples' progress are identified strengths of this service.

The agency is one of six demonstration sites in the research-led Head, Heart and Hands programme, which is researching how social pedagogic foster care can make a positive difference to children and young people placed. This involvement demonstrates the agency's strong commitment to improving outcomes for the children and young people placed with them. Social pedagogy is becoming embedded within the day-to-day activities and policies of the agency, alongside the agency's therapeutic approach to the provision of high quality care. These 'golden threads' of practice permeate throughout the agency's work and contribute to the delivery of an outstanding quality of care to children and young people looked after.

Foster carers commend the outstanding support both they and the children and young people placed with them receive from agency staff, leading to the delivery of excellent day-to-day care. Examples given included: 'The agency's lead therapist came out to my home to work with to help me deal effectively with the young person's challenging behaviour'; and, 'My foster child wanted to go on a Brownie camp, but she was unlikely to manage this successfully. One of the agency's social pedagogues went with her, despite the lack of interest and support of the Brownie troupe. My foster child was able to stay over the same as other Brownies'. Furthermore, foster carers applaud the excellent quality of support and advice they regularly receive from the agency's supervising social workers and the out of office hours service when crisis arise. Accessible support helps them to effectively meet

children and young peoples' diverse needs and to keep them safe from harm.

The agency provides parent and child arrangements (PCA) and good progress has been made in the further development of this aspect of the fostering service. Staff and foster carers have completed a structured PCA training course. Furthermore, some supervising social workers are now qualified to undertake specialist assessment processes. This has helped raise the quality of these placements. The learning gained by foster carers and staff from providing placements for adults and their children has also contributed to improvements in the quality of this provision. One foster carer said, 'The training has been excellent and I feel more confident in providing these placements and in working with adults'.

Foster carers demonstrate a thorough understanding of their foster child's care plans and their delegated authority. They show confidence and competence in carrying out their caring accountabilities. This results in the children and young people they look after not being disadvantaged and being treated similarly to their peers living within their birth families. Foster carers know how to communicate with the children and young people they look after and they are very good at making them feel part of the fostering household. The agency also provides respite placements for children and young people when it is in the individual's best interests. Often these placements are with carers who live locally and are already known to the child or young person. This results in a minimum level of disruption to the lives of children and young people.

Foster carers are recruited across the south west of England to provide a diverse range of placements to meet the identified needs of looked after children and young people in this area. The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is comprehensive and robust, with a clear focus on meeting the needs of children and young people placed. These processes provide foster carers with a realistic understanding of their role, and those of the local authority and the fostering agency.

The fostering panel consists of suitably qualified and experienced persons. The panel effectively carries out its quality assurance functions, including robust challenge to the agency, and clearly delivers its sound recommendations. The panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements and there is effective communication between the panel and the fostering agency. Foster carers' feedback about their assessment and attendance at panel is sought to improve agency processes. The agency has recently appointed an external reviewing officer for carer's annual reviews. This increases external challenge to the agency's practice and is likely to further raise the quality of care provided within the agency to children and young people and to protect them.

The agency is vigilant in obtaining key information pertaining to each child or young person prior to placement, to enable foster carers to fulfil their roles effectively and provide exemplary care that meets children and young peoples' needs. The agency has a robust system in place to chase up outstanding documents to ensure foster carers have prompt access to relevant facts.

Children and young peoples' health and wellbeing is well promoted and monitored by the agency and their physical and emotional health needs are well met. Foster carers maintain a health passport for each child and young person they look after. This provides them with key health information that they can take with them when they leave their foster carers to ensure they continue to receive appropriate health care in the future. Children and young peoples' emotional wellbeing benefits from the therapeutic approach of the agency and the availability of therapy in line with the implementation of their individual care plans.

The agency's educational coordinator trains and support foster carers and staff in how best to support children and young people in their education and employment. The coordinator's excellent knowledge and substantial experience supports foster carers to help children and young people to identify and access appropriate educational courses and schools that are likely to meet their individual needs. The coordinator's rigorous oversight and high aspirations for children and young people results in foster carers robustly challenging the quality and implementation of individual Personal Education Plans and Pathway plans. Foster carers know about available funding packages in place to support looked after children's education and they are rigorous in ensuring this is accessed to support their foster child's developmental needs.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young peoples' wellbeing is protected by the agency's comprehensive range of sound safeguarding policies and clearly written foster carers' guidance. The agency's safeguarding policies take account of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care policies, protocols and procedures that are in place across the local and unitary authorities in the south west of England. The provision of these key guidance documents underpins the sound safeguarding practice evidenced within this agency.

The agency works collaboratively with placing authorities and local safeguarding agencies to protect and promote children and young peoples' safety and welfare. Appropriate safeguarding measures have been taken to protect children and young people in response to identified concerns. However, not all notifications of significant events have been made to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector and this lack of external oversight weakens the agency's safeguarding of children and young people. However, no negative impact on outcomes for children and young people were identified as a result of this management shortfall.

Children and young people say that they feel very safe in their foster homes and their foster carers tell them about how to keep themselves safe in the community. Excellent matching processes and adherence to individual's care plans result in children and young people living in stable placements where they are kept safe and secure. The number of children and young people missing from this agency is approximately 50% lower than the national comparator for all agencies.

Sound area management support and supervision of agency social workers, alongside the diligent implementation of care plans, helps to minimise any likely risk of harm to children and young people. The agency's qualified social workers demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding practice and they provide good advice and support to foster carers during their regular supervisory visits. Foster carers recognise the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people and understand their role in securing young people's safety and protection. They appreciate that children and young people should be encouraged and supported to take age-appropriate risks as part of their development into adulthood.

Safe care policies are drawn up for each placement to identify and minimise likely risks to children and young people. Most safe caring policies have been reviewed on at least an annual basis, while others meet best practice standards and have been reviewed and amended in response to arising changes. Annual health and safety checks and annual reviews are undertaken and these activities further protect children and young people. This year, unannounced visits to foster carers' homes are being increased to two visits a year; this further protects the safety and welfare of children and young people placed.

Recruitment and selection procedures meet safer recruitment guidance standards.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The registered persons are suitably qualified and experienced and demonstrate a strong focus on the outcomes, progress and experiences of children and young people placed with the agency. The Registered Manager and the responsible individual have worked collaboratively together for a considerable period of time leading this agency. Their differing roles and accountabilities are clearly defined. However, the management structure and lines of communication in place have resulted in ineffective management practice and a lack of rigour in the oversight of some areas of the agency's work.

The Registered Manager is also an area manager and consequently, they do not supervise the three other area managers within the agency. This is the assigned responsibility of the responsible individual. Thus, the quality assurance and monitoring processes completed by the Registered Manager are heavily reliant on information gathered from the agency's database, schedule 6 monitoring completed by each area manager and discussion at the area manager's monthly meeting. The wide span of control of the Registered Manager means that they are unlikely to be aware of decision-making processes and all events arising at area office level. Their lack of detailed knowledge about what is happening at practice level contributes to weakness in monitoring processes.

Some input errors within the database have resulted in inaccurate data reports being formulated. However, the interrogation of gathered data by management lacks

sufficient rigour and the inaccurate and confused entries had not been identified and addressed. This has resulted in: notifications of significant events not being forwarded to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector; inaccuracies in the identification of schedule 6 and schedule 7 events; tardiness in ensuring safer caring policies are regularly reviewed; and a lack of awareness of sufficient management information being gathered to effectively monitor the administration of medication to children and young people within each foster home, to ensure children and young people's welfare is promoted. All of these shortfalls have potential to place children and young people at risk. However, the inspection identified no evidence of any adverse impact on the safety and welfare of children and young people as a result of ineffective monitoring practice.

The inspection identified some further anomalies in the designated roles of the responsible individual and the Registered Manager. For example, the responsible individual and Registered Manager both take the role of the agency decision-maker. However, as the Registered Manager has line management accountability for the supervising social workers within the area office they manage, this is not appropriate. Should one of these social workers present at panel, and the Registered Manager is the agency decision-maker, then there is a conflict of interest. The responsible individual agreed during the inspection that the Registered Manager would no longer undertake this role. Moreover, within the current management structure, the Registered Manager has the responsibility to investigate allegations and complaints made against the agency. This means that the Registered Manager could be required to investigate their line manager, which is not appropriate.

The agency has taken great care in reviewing and amending the children's guide and young people's guide to provide child-friendly documents that contain clear information. The agency's statement of purpose has also been updated within the last year. However, these key documents had not been sent to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, as is required. This shortfall was satisfactorily addressed by the agency's managers during the inspection.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Staffing ratios are good; the agency is well resourced and is financially viable. Staff benefit from good training opportunities and are developing their skills which enable them to effectively supervise foster carers. Staff receive regular supervision and an annual appraisal of their performance. This contributes to raising performance and the quality of care provided to children and young people.

The agency demonstrates an outstanding commitment for continuous improvement to benefit the outcomes and progress of children and young people. The progress and outcomes for children and young people in placement are closely monitored to ensure their needs are being met and they are making good progress. Participation opportunities for foster carers and children and young people are increasing within the agency and their involvement further enriches the quality of care provided to children and young people. The agency has established a clear understanding with contracting local authorities and works collaboratively with social workers and other professionals.

Leaders and managers are inspirational and ambitious about making a positive difference to the lives of the children and young people placed with the agency. The agency is taking part in the social pedagogy research led programme with the aim of changing children and young peoples' experiences for the better. There is clear evidence that the agency has been instrumental in making enormous differences in the lives of many children and young people. One young person summarised this by saying, 'they [my foster family] have made me what I am today; I wasn't like this before I came to live here and I didn't know I could be like this. I am confident now, I don't mind saying what I think and I know what I want to do with my life.'

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.