

Integrated Services Programme

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

Integrated Services Programme (ISP) is a well-established independent fostering agency whose head office is based in Kent, where it has been registered and subsequently inspected for a number of years. The service has more recently expanded its range of operations and opened additional branches in the southeast, including this branch in Chesham, which was registered in July 2006. The service provides emergency, short term, longer term and respite foster care placements for what are seen as more difficult to place young people and provides a range of additional educational and therapeutic support for carers and young people to assist placement stability. At the time of this inspection the branch had 21 approved foster households on its register. The service accepts placements from its local and neighbouring local authorities. Some aspects of central administration, finance, personnel, placement referrals, foster panel administration and carer recruitment campaigns are still supported by the agency's head office in Kent.

Summary

This was an announced key inspection of this fostering agency branch that was carried out over a period of three days. The agency provides very high quality child-centred placements for young people that are able to meet their needs consistently and offer good long-term stability. Diligent attention is paid to thorough assessment and approval of carers to ensure their suitability. Child protection matters and the physical suitability of carer households are well managed and monitored to ensure placed young people are kept safe. Excellent support is offered by the agency in areas of health and education to help ensure placed young people thrive and achieve. Very good attention is paid to support of contact and to ensuring the views of placed young people are heard and taken into account. Very good preparation is made for older young people leaving care. Carers are offered an excellent support structure to help ensure they are able to meet the needs of placed young people consistently. The agency is staffed in sufficient number by appropriately qualified and experienced staff and the day to day operation of the branch is well managed. There are excellent systems for monitoring the welfare of placed young people and the ongoing suitability of placements.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

There were no requirements made at the last inspection of this agency. A number of recommendations were made. It was recommended that policies in relation to exemptions, child protection and complaints be updated and revised as appropriate. These issues have now been addressed. Records for foster carers needed some minor amendments to bring them into line with regulatory expectations. These amendments have been completed. The agency was also not routinely notifying area authorities following review or termination of carer approvals. Systems have now been introduced to address this point. The agency had not obtained the relevant level of Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks for all staff who might have unsupervised contact with young people. Updated checks have now been carried out and recruitment procedures amended to address this issue. Carer assessments did not routinely include formal contact with schools and Ofsted where relevant to the circumstances of individual carer households. This has now been put into place as part of assessment procedures.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency and its carers provide excellent support to placed young people to ensure their health care needs are identified and met appropriately. The agency provides excellent central management and leadership of health care promotion and monitoring. There are robust systems in place for notification to, and liaison with, local area health professionals with responsibilities for Looked After Children (LAC). The agency works hard, though with sometimes limited success, to obtain relevant background health information on young people prior to placement. Detailed health care plans are drawn up for all placed young people and there is excellent compliance with annual medical assessment expectations for placed young people. Carers are diligent in ensuring placed young people are promptly registered with local health services and are consistent in their follow-up to any identified health care needs. The agency carries out regular monitoring through formal carer supervision of how well the health care needs of placed children are being met. Accidents and illnesses are responded to appropriately by carers and closely monitored through the agency's reporting structures. Carers receive relevant training in first aid and a range of health related matters aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles. The agency has access to relevant medical expertise in relation to carer approval and review assessments. The agency provides a comprehensive and flexible range of in-house therapeutic services for young people and for carers, aimed at addressing their emotional and mental health care needs. Where appropriate the agency works well in supporting access to specialist external health and mental health services for young people

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency ensures there are good levels of safety and protection offered to young people placed in their care. The agency, both centrally and at branch level, is run by suitably qualified and experienced managers and no concerns have arisen about their fitness for these roles. Diligent attention is paid to ensuring fostering households are physically safe environments for young people as part of initial approval and subsequent household review and supervision procedures. Unannounced visits are undertaken to carer households as a further safeguard. Carers are provided with appropriate training and guidance on health and safety matters. The agency pays excellent attention to matching referred children with suitable carer placements, with due consideration paid to carer abilities and preferences, alongside careful identification of referred young people's needs. Wherever possible a process of introduction and visits is undertaken to try to ensure both young people and carers are happy with the proposed placement. The majority of placements are made on planned rather than emergency basis, which allows for proper consideration of matching criteria. The agency continues to face problems in obtaining comprehensive background information from some placing authorities which, at times, may compromise the process of accurate matching. The agency is sensitive to particular changes in carers' circumstances that might have implications for the range of placements they can accommodate. The agency has comprehensive child protection policy, procedures and guidance in place for staff and carers. Staff and carers have regular access to relevant training in child protection and safe caring practices. When child protection concerns arise the agency makes appropriate notification to external agencies and takes appropriate action, in conjunction with investigating authorities, to safeguard the welfare of placed children. Good systems are in place to support carers who may be subject to allegations. Appropriate complaints procedures and related information are in place for carers and young people. No

complaints have arisen since the last inspection. The agency has suitable guidance in place to aid carers in the management of behaviour and this is supported by access to relevant training opportunities and advice from therapists if required. Specific training is provided for carers on managing physical interventions with young people safely. Robust systems are in place for reporting and monitoring any unauthorised absences by young people. The agency has excellent systems at both branch and central office levels for monitoring of all key events affecting young people's welfare. This helps ensure rigorous oversight of key practice areas and early identification of any patterns of concern. Recruitment policies and procedures are robust and generally appropriately applied. However the inspection identified one situation where a staff member started work prior to receipt of a new CRB clearance by the agency without being subject to risk assessment. The agency's fostering panel is appropriately constituted and the new local chairperson is suitably qualified and experienced. The panel members come from a wide range of backgrounds and have suitable level of experience and knowledge to contribute to panel processes. Scrutiny of panel minutes confirms that the panel is well run and undertakes its work thoroughly and conscientiously in seeking to ensure only safe and suitable foster households are approved. Where approval applications are unsatisfactory they are appropriately challenged by the panel. The panel chairperson and panel members have access to relevant training opportunities

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency addresses matters of diversity thoroughly in its assessment processes for new carers and in initial and ongoing training opportunities for carers and staff. Care feedback indicates they feel the agency is particularly alert to addressing issues of diversity in the process of placement matching and placement support. The agency continues to increase its range of carers from black and minority ethnic communities which offers improved scope for placement matching for young people from similar backgrounds. Where such placements are made the agency is particularly sensitive to ensuring the match is appropriate in terms of cultural expectations and support for religious observance. The agency avoids transracial placement except where the paramount needs of young people dictate otherwise and will provide appropriate guidance and support for carers in such circumstances to ensure placed young people's diversity needs are met fully. The agency branch does not currently support any placements for young people with significant levels of disability although this is an area of need the agency is intending to explore further in the future. The local branch staff team contains staff members from different ethnic backgrounds and from both genders. The agency provides an outstanding level of support for young people's educational achievement. Local specialist education staff offer a comprehensive and flexible package of support for carers and young people. This includes direct involvement alongside carers in negotiating suitable education placements with area education authorities, packages of direct additional staff support for young people in their education settings and the provision of supplementary or alternative education packages for young people who cannot sustain mainstream school places. The education support extends to negotiation and support of college, university and work related placements for older young people. Feedback from carers and young people is of universal praise for the quality of the education support service. The education staff team also maintains excellent oversight and monitoring of placed young people's educational progress and achievement. That achievement is suitably recognised in formal celebration events and in agency newsletters. The agency is noting significant improvement and progress in the educational achievement of young people as a result of the degree of input it provides.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency and its carers are fully aware of the importance of sustaining family links and contact arrangements where this is in the best interests of placed young people. Carers' training covers working with families and support of contact. Young people's records indicate that where formal contact arrangements are in place these are fully supported by the agency. The agency provides appropriate venues for contact if required, and also staff to supervise sessions if necessary. The agency ensures that, unless there is a specific and justifiable need, contact takes place away from carer households to help ensure carer households and placed young people are protected from the direct impact of contact arrangements. The agency has an excellent range of opportunities for young people to contribute their views and opinions on the quality of their care and the running of the agency. Feedback from young people indicates they feel fully involved and consulted by their carers over the day to day planning of their care. They can also attend and contribute to their own care reviews and are consulted as part of carer household reviews. The agency also carries out occasional surveys of young people's more general views of the quality of the agency's services and support. Feedback from these surveys indicates young people have few complaints to make. Local groups for placed young people to share their views and experiences have now been established and the agency is also in the process of establishing a shadow 'board' of placed young people to consult with on overall policy and practice developments. The agency provides a good range of written information for young people which has been revised and updated in the light of young people's comments to make it more relevant and child-friendly. This information includes contact details for helplines and advocacy services for looked after young people.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency has developed some excellent practice in relation to preparation of young people for adulthood and leaving care. Under the leadership of a central Leaving Care Co-ordinator detailed skills assessment processes have been introduced and are used by carers with older young people in placement to assess and meet their independence preparation needs. These supplement, or in some instances replace/fill void of, local authority Pathway Planning for young people leaving care. Carers have access to good training in this area of practice. Good liaison is maintained with local authorities as young people get older to ensure Pathway Planning is underway and to clarify different areas of responsibility for preparing young people for moving on. The agency is also strongly supportive of young people and carers where local authorities are making inadequate or poorly planned transitions from care and will sustain placements with carers until more suitable options are firmly established. Carers support young people in establishing savings for moving on, although the variation of local authority expectations in this area and the pragmatic difficulties involved mean this is sometimes not straightforward. The agency provides a good level of core allowances for carers that are above the minimums recommended by central government and carers indicate that they feel these allowances cover the day to day care needs of placed young people satisfactorily. Systems for payment of regular allowances and additional reimbursement to carers work efficiently. Where specific additional expenditure is required the agency supports carers in negotiations with placing authorities if necessary. The agency sometimes provides additional services for placed young people at its own cost, where local authorities will not provide funding but the agency

feels they are essential for the young person's wellbeing. The agency also maintains a Foundation which can offer additional financial support to placed young people in particular circumstances.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency has a satisfactory statement of purpose in place that combines general information about the agency as a whole and an outline of the particular services and structure of its local branches. The latter section with regard to the Chesham branch does not fully reflect the detail of the range of local services and different staffing areas of responsibility. The Chesham branch is well managed with clearly defined areas of managerial and staff responsibility and decision-making across the different aspects of the agency's local operations. Staff are appropriately deployed to meet work priorities and are appropriately experienced and/or qualified for the work they are undertaking. The agency makes use of both directly employed staff and a range of independent assessors to support in particular the undertaking of initial carer assessments and annual household reviews. Staffing numbers are satisfactory to support the functions of the agency and appropriate arrangements are put into place to cover short-term staff absences. Improvements have been made to the level of administrative support for the area fostering panel and the agency is alert to the need for possible future staff increases as the number of carers supported by the branch increases. Staff report they are well supported by managers with regular access to formal and informal support and regular team meetings. Carer numbers continue to grow steadily and now result in a broader range of local options for possible placement. Particular success has been achieved in recruiting more carers to the north of area covered by the branch and ongoing recruitment campaigns continue to use a variety of mechanisms to attract new carers. Carer assessments are based on the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) assessment framework. They are generally very thorough and cover all areas required by regulations and standards. Very few applicants who initially apply actually successfully complete initial vetting or subsequent full assessment processes indicating the care with which the agency selects its carers. There is evidence of some inconsistency in the quality of work undertaken by some external independent assessors that the agency is now seeking to address by establishing a smaller pool of reliable assessors. Systems for annual review are generally thorough and effective and review reports are generally very comprehensive, taking into account all relevant information on which to base judgements of carers' continuing suitability to foster. Some minor delays in the regularity of carer reviews are in evidence. The agency has a comprehensive and very positively viewed structure of support for carers in place. This includes regular formal supervision by a supervising social worker aided by additional visiting by a member of staff with specific carer support responsibilities. Carers confirm there is additional regular contact by telephone and that any concerns or queries they raise are dealt with promptly by agency staff. Carers are particularly complimentary about the support offered by staff when placements are under pressure or they are struggling with particular challenges. Carers are provided with access when needed to formal therapeutic support by the agency's therapists either on a group or individual basis as preferred. There are regular carer forums which have recently been duplicated in the north of the region to facilitate access by carers living in that area. Respite support is offered when needed and seen to be placed in young people's best interests. Support groups and individual input are provided for carers' own children. Carers' hard work is recognised by occasional celebration events and rewards such as hampers at Christmas time. Carers are provided with good ongoing training and development opportunities to enable them to meet young people's needs appropriately. The agency also deserves recognition for the range of support it offers directly to young people placed. Much

of this has been documented elsewhere in this report in areas such as therapeutic and educational input. In addition, although not strictly the agency's responsibility, the regular visiting by the agency's supervising social worker and other agency staff offers good opportunities for direct contact with placed young people. Agency staff often develop very good and supportive relationships with placed young people, which contribute significantly to the more immediate support offered by carers and help ensure the security and stability of placements. This is particularly crucial in the repeated circumstances where young people's support from their own local authority is either lacking or inconsistent. Records for carers and placed children are generally very well maintained, as are the general administrative records required under standards and regulations. As noted elsewhere in this report there are continuing gaps in the provision by local authorities of the full range of LAC documentation. The record of placements held on carer files still does not explicitly require staff to note reasons for placements ending, although this is generally being noted. Records are subject to occasional audit by central agency staff. The agency has comprehensive and robust systems of monitoring that more than fully meet the expectations of the regulations and standards. Formal supervision structures for carers cover all the key outcome areas under the government's Every Child Matters framework. This helps ensure placed young people's needs are being consistently met. The local manager maintains good oversight and monitoring of the specific areas required under regulations. This is augmented by rigorous reporting and monitoring undertaken centrally within the agency. The agency also employs quality assurance staff who carry out occasional audits of the quality of different areas of work undertaken in the branches.

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 all required recruitment checks are carried out prior to staff commencing work at the agency and that, if any staff do commence work before receipt of all required checks, this decision is subject to detailed risk assessment by senior managers.(Regulation 20)	31 March 2008

Recommendations

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

- continue to insist on the provision of all required information regarding young people from placing authorities prior to placements commencing. (NMS 24)
- review the record of placements held on carer files to ensure there is a clear expectation that reasons for termination of placements are consistently recorded (NMS 25)

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.