

Blue Sky Fostering

Blue Sky Fostering Limited

Broadwater House, Broadwater Road, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 8GT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is privately owned and operated. At the time of this inspection, there were 223 approved fostering households providing care for a total of 270 children and young people across the south of England, in short-term, long-term, parent and child, emergency and bridging placements.

The agency offers packages of enhanced support and a therapeutically led care service to children who have experienced emotional abuse or trauma, or who have behavioural issues. The agency also provides direct work with families, which aims to help some children to return to live with them.

Inspection dates: 7 to 8 October and 4 to 8 November 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 24 January 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Foster carers are highly skilled and committed to meeting the children's individual needs. They provide exceptional care and regularly go above and beyond for children. Consequently, children feel safe, secure and nurtured. They grow and develop as cherished members of the fostering family with a strong sense of stability, love and belonging. Foster carers speak warmly about the children with love and care. One carer referred to themselves as 'blessed' with their child. Carers consistently provide children with experiences that enhance their lives. For some children, living with their foster carers has been life-changing.

Meticulous matching of children with their foster family and well-planned moves into the home help ensure that children are embraced into the family. The careful matching means that children experience high levels of stability in their foster family whatever challenges they face. Many children have lived with their foster families for a long time, some for many years, and refer to their foster parents as 'mum' and 'dad'.

Foster families build strong, genuine, loving and caring relationships with the children. The strong bonds built ensure that the children become core members of the family. When children turn 18 they often remain with their foster carers.

The agency thoroughly assesses prospective foster carers and members of their household to ensure suitability. The agency provides an excellent range of high-quality preparation training. Children and foster carers are involved in the delivery of this training. Consequently, prospective carers and their children are extremely well prepared for fostering. They understand trauma-informed parenting and the likely challenges from both foster carers and children's perspectives.

Foster carers are patient, kind and supportive of the children that they care for. They want what is best for them. They encourage the children to pursue their interests, passions and talents. Foster carers build children's confidence and self-belief in their ability to succeed. Children and foster carers shared many personal examples of the huge difference that foster families have made. One child had no spoken English when they arrived to live with their carers. The carers seized on the child's interest in cricket and played with them to build their relationship. This child is now proud to represent their county in the local cricket team. Other carers have developed children's interests and talents in subjects such as animal care and art to help them to develop aspirations for their future. Other children have been supported to excel in their chosen academic fields. Foster carers see the individuality of each child and support them to reach their personal goals and dreams, whether this be to achieve sporting excellence or undertake careers in animal care, or as a tattooist, or to study law at university.

Foster carers who provide parent and child arrangements are well trained and supported. They meet the parents' needs with a non-judgmental approach. They role model positive parenting while keeping the focus on the safety and well-being of the child. One young parent said: 'Honestly, I cannot put into words how much [name of foster carer] helped me. She is an exceptional person all round. I had no faith in myself. I was ready to pack my bags and she would sit for hours on end. She listened and then I knew I could do it.'

The therapeutic ethos is thoroughly embedded throughout the agency. An extensive menu of bespoke therapeutic support to children, foster families, staff and others is provided. This offers further insight and support to understand children's individual needs. Therapeutic training is provided for both foster carers and (if appropriate), their children. This support helps to ensure that children get the help that they need. One foster carer said in respect of their child with additional needs: 'A bright future lies in front of her. Without the help from Blue Sky this would not have been possible.'

Children say that they really value the variety of events and trips provided. They enjoy sports days, water sports, Halloween events, 'amazing' Christmas parties and visits to the pantomime every year. Staff are creative in the face of challenges. For example, when younger children said that they were disappointed to be too young to take part in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme, staff developed a similar programme for younger children. One child spoke with pride about the skills that they have developed due to the opportunities they have had. They said: 'These activities have allowed me to meet new friends and learn new things, which allowed me to increase my confidence and build my life skills.'

Thoughtfulness about the needs of children who foster (the foster carer's own children) is threaded through the agency. Conversations are had with children at the point of assessment and remain ongoing. Children who foster can access all of the fun days and most activities and support systems that are in place for foster children. Special We Foster Too panels and events are held and agency social workers build close relationships with them. This approach ensures that their needs are not forgotten. One child who fosters said: 'All social workers have been amazing to everyone but [name] was the best. She may not be my social worker now, but she is still there right by my side. I don't think of her as a social worker, I think of her as a friend.'

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

Children and foster carers feel safe and cared for. They know that staff will always ensure that they are all supported to stay safe. Staff are creative in helping children and carers understand risk through training, workshops and individual support.

Senior leaders ensure an exceptional approach to monitoring, identifying and responding to risk. Staff work in extremely close partnership with children and their carers to reduce risks. Staff ensure that risks are well understood at the point that children move in. These risks are kept under constant review and mitigated as much

as is possible. Foster carers act swiftly and appropriately to support children's safety when children go missing from home or are involved in risky situations.

Foster carers create families in which children feel safe and emotionally held. The agency directly employs therapists and individual support workers who provide bespoke therapeutic packages of support to children and their fostering families. Foster carers are trained in therapeutic approaches. They benefit from regular meetings with a therapist to help them to deliver therapeutic parenting. The family's needs are constantly reviewed and the enhanced support that the agency provides helps them through difficult times.

Children trust their carers. They can talk to them and feel confident that they will be listened to. Children are matched with individual support workers who develop trusting relationships with them. These workers explore and support the child's therapeutic needs. They also do targeted work with children about how to keep safe. Children like the time that they spend with the agency staff. As a result, children identify them as people outside the fostering family who they feel confident to talk to.

Senior leaders maintain rigorous oversight of safeguarding matters. Weekly risk management meetings and good communication mean that senior leaders are quickly alerted to any concerns. Staff who work in the agency's out-of-hours service are fully updated on changes to households and emerging risks. This means that foster carers receive responsive support whenever they need it.

Agency staff and foster carers understand their core safeguarding roles and responsibilities. They are quick to escalate issues when there are concerns. Senior leaders challenge safeguarding partners who do not take clear and decisive action to protect children.

Any concerns regarding the care and support provided to children are shared with relevant partner agencies and robustly investigated. Records of these investigations are thorough. The agency presents any standards of care investigations to panel. The good use of panel provides additional and transparent scrutiny. The agency decision-maker shows professional curiosity and follows up any potential lines of enquiry to ensure that her decision-making about carers' initial and ongoing suitability is well informed. Any appeals to the independent review mechanism have not been upheld because of this thorough approach.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The newly registered manager, responsible individual and other senior leaders have worked for the agency for a significant time. They provide a sense of continued stability and commitment. Their ongoing and consistent aspirations and care for children, carers and everyone involved with the agency are clearly modelled and shared. Consequently, there is a clear, positive organisational culture which everyone embodies.

Inclusive practice is embedded in the agency. One member of staff said: 'We do with, not do to.' Staff and carers fully understand and consistently embrace this value statement in their day-to-day practice. Children, carers and staff describe an organisational culture of nurture, value, respect and empowerment from the first point of contact with the agency. A care-experienced panel member explained how agency staff check in with them after each panel to ensure their well-being after difficult discussions. One carer said: 'This last year has no doubt been one of the hardest years we've had to face. I honestly could not have got through it without the support of some of the staff from Blue Sky. The support they gave me and continue to give our family I will forever be grateful for.'

The staff and carers say that they are proud to work for Blue Sky. They are proud of the work that they do and the difference that they make. Achievements are celebrated with Wow and Core Value awards. Carers who have been with the agency for 10 years are celebrated with Decade lunches. The vast majority of carers feel incredibly well supported through carer support groups, buddy systems and the carer connect groups. On those rare occasions when foster carers have not felt well supported, staff sought to understand the reason and make changes, for example by offering improved training for staff and support for carers in situations when there are standards of care investigations.

The agency provides an impressive training and support offer for foster children, children who foster, foster carers and staff. Foster families benefit from family fun days, and regular targeted support groups in addition to the core training offer. The agency is creative in its approach to training and support. Staff are keen to embrace new technology such as apps, short videos and podcasts to support carers, staff and children, including children who foster and those who have moved on.

The clear and effective management structure ensures defined lines of accountability without unnecessary hierarchy. Children, staff and carers know that they can ring anyone in this agency, including the senior leadership team, and that the person they speak to will have time for them. One carer said: 'It is lovely for me to be able to call, email or talk to all the managers like I would my social worker. The door is always open. They are always a phone call away.' Another carer said: 'They [agency staff and managers], are always available to us for help and advice and make sure that we know it.'

Children's and carers' voices are central to everything that the agency does. The role that carers, children and children who foster play through the consultation groups and the We Foster Too panel in policy development, recruitment and training is particularly valued. This helps the agency to provide training and guidance to carers which reflects the reality of the challenges they face and to keep a keen focus on what matters most to children. One carer said: 'I think this sums up Blue Sky in that they put the children first always.'

Carers describe the agency as retaining its 'family feel' despite significant growth. The high involvement and commitment from staff, children and foster carers help senior

leaders, in spite of the size of the agency, to maintain exceptional oversight. The managers encourage reflective practice and creativity at every level, with a consistent drive to do better by children.

No requirements or recommendations were set at this inspection.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

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