



*Making Social Care
Better for People*

inspection report

FOSTERING SERVICE

Families First

**Families First
10 Powderham Road
Newton Abbot
Devon
TQ12 1EU**

Lead Inspector
Sophie Barton

Announced Inspection
19th March 2007 10:00 am

The Commission for Social Care Inspection aims to:

- Put the people who use social care first
- Improve services and stamp out bad practice
- Be an expert voice on social care
- Practise what we preach in our own organisation

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This is a report of an inspection to assess whether services are meeting the needs of people who use them. The legal basis for conducting inspections is the Care Standards Act 2000 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for this establishment are those for *Fostering Services*. They can be found at www.dh.gov.uk or obtained from The Stationery Office (TSO) PO Box 29, St Crispins, Duke Street, Norwich, NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 600 5522. Online ordering: www.tso.co.uk/bookshop

Every Child Matters, outlined the government's vision for children's services and formed the basis of the Children Act 2004. It provides a framework for inspection so that children's services should be judged on their contribution to the outcomes considered essential to wellbeing in childhood and later life. Those outcomes are:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a contribution; and
- Achieving economic wellbeing.

In response, the Commission for Social Care Inspection has re-ordered the national minimum standards for children's services under the five outcomes, for reporting purposes. A further section has been created under 'Management' to cover those issues that will potentially impact on all the outcomes above.

Copies of *Every Child Matters* and *The Children Act 2004* are available from The Stationery Office as above

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SERVICE INFORMATION

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Provider Web address	
Name of registered provider(s)/company (if applicable)	Shelagh Gage
Name of registered manager (if applicable)	Vacant
Type of registration	Fostering Agencies

SERVICE INFORMATION

Conditions of registration:

Date of last inspection 27th February 2006

Brief Description of the Service:

Families First is an Independent Fostering Agency based in Newton Abbot, Devon. The agency provides emergency, respite, short term, long term and sibling group placements. The agency also provides parent and child placements / assessments which are time limited and are reported upon within the court arena.

The agency consists of three Directors (with social work, guardian ad litem, education and health experience background), an agency manager, a fostering manager, a parent/child assessment manager, six supervising social workers, two family support workers, and three office staff. Sessional staff are also employed to carry out foster carer assessments when needed. The agency also use/fund a range of consultants (child and adolescent psychiatrist, child and adolescent psychotherapist, drug and alcohol advisor) to support carers and placements, and to provide specialist supervision to staff.

At the start of this inspection the agency had 47 carers and 39 children/young people placed. Carers are based largely in South Devon and North Devon, although a recent recruitment campaign is underway in Cornwall.

Carers are supported by allocated supervising social workers who visit carers regularly and maintain telephone contact. The team provides a 24 hour on-call duty service. All workers are qualified and experienced social workers. The agency provide extensive pre-approval and post training to carers. Prospective carers are fully assessed using the British Adoption and Fostering form f assessment tool. There is an established fostering panel.

SUMMARY

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

The providers were informed in advance of the planned dates for this inspection, which was carried out between the 19th and 26th March 2007 by two inspectors. An inspector visited three fostering households, and spoke with the foster carers, and young people in placement. An inspector also interviewed the directors of the agency, the agency manager, the fostering and parent/child assessment managers, and three supervising social workers. A telephone interview took place with the fostering panel chairperson.

Three placing social workers were also contacted via telephone to further discuss the services provided by the agency, and the suitability of the placements for their young people. The case records for three foster carers were examined in detail, and of four young people. The assessment documents for two foster carers recently approved were also examined, together with a carer who has recently resigned.

The providers also completed a detailed self assessment report detailing what the service does well and what they could improve.

Questionnaires were sent by the Commission to the foster carers, children and young people and to placing social workers and other professionals. Twenty were returned from foster carers, fifteen from young people, five from social workers and three from other professionals.

What the service does well:

There are many commendable practice areas, where the minimum standards are exceeded. The fostering agency is run by experienced and knowledgeable directors, who are clearly committed to improving the life chances of children, and ensuring child centred practices. The social work staff are also highly skilled, and provide a high level of supervision and guidance to foster carers.

Foster carers feel very supported and valued by the agency. They have regular visits by the supervising social workers, can access 24 hour support, and have many varied and practical training opportunities. Placement stability is maintained and placements provide positive environments for children, by the input of specialist consultants, flexible pre-placement planning, high levels of supervision to carers, thorough care planning and needs assessment.

A foster carer quoted *"they have matched a child extremely well with our family. They have fantastic support groups. Always there when we need them, our link worker is brilliant and looks out for every member of our family"*.

The agency is proactive in ensuring health and educational needs are met. There are good recording systems, which clearly identify children's needs,

goals and aspirations. The agency has clearly advocated on behalf of children to ensure that educational and health needs are met by the necessary statutory agencies.

Foster carers understand and support the need for children to maintain contact with family and friends, and assist fully in ensuring contact arrangements are followed through.

Children also confirmed through questionnaires that they are provided with good care, support and stability with their foster carers. One young person said about her foster carer *"they make me feel happy and loved"*.

What has improved since the last inspection?

There have been recent staff and management changes. There is now an extra management level to enable the agency to cope effectively with its recent growth. This has ensured that referrals are managed more effectively, and also that monitoring and quality assurance is given due consideration.

There are clearer recording and monitoring systems in place, allowing the agency to demonstrate progress and attainment levels of young people. The agency is fully incorporating the 'Every Child Matters' outcomes, ensuring carers and social work staff support children with these key areas.

What they could do better:

The inspector noted some areas where significant change to practice is needed to ensure the welfare of children is safeguarded. These areas however were all acknowledged by the agency prior to inspection, and were in the process of being addressed. So although some poor practice was identified the inspector is confident that the providers have already started to address these failings.

In particular foster carers have not been reviewed regularly, or their first review been referred to the fostering panel. It is important for thorough reviews to take place to ensure that other professionals and young people's views are sought on the continued appropriateness of the carers. Each carer did not have an up to date 'foster care agreement' detailing their current approval status. There were also three children placed with foster carers whose approval status was not consistent with the placement. This can affect appropriate matching, and limits the recognition of the needs and capability of the fostering household.

Foster carers' case records lacked necessary documentation to ensure regulations were met. Of most importance was the inaccurate record of the children placed with carers. Finally, breaches in recruitment regulations were also noted, in that proof of identity and verification of why previous

employment ended was not always obtained. This was for some but not all recent recruitments.

Some minor shortfalls were noted in relation to the fostering panels attendance and membership, which needed to be tightened up to ensure better consistency. Case records also needed to be kept up to date and clearly recorded on foster carers' files to ensure a comprehensive record of events is kept.

Please contact the provider for advice of actions taken in response to this inspection.

The report of this inspection is available from enquiries@csci.gsi.gov.uk or by contacting your local CSCI office. The summary of this inspection report can be made available in other formats on request.

DETAILS OF INSPECTOR FINDINGS

CONTENTS

Being Healthy

Staying Safe

Enjoying and Achieving

Making a Positive Contribution

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

Management

Scoring of Outcomes

Statutory Requirements Identified During the Inspection

Being Healthy

The intended outcome for this Standard is:

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

The Commission considers Standard 12 the key standard to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at the outcome for Standard:

12

*Quality in this outcome area is **good**. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.*

The fostering agency is very good at ensuring the health needs of children are met, with children promptly receiving support with specialist needs.

EVIDENCE:

The inspector examined the files of three young people. These all evidenced that sufficient information had been obtained about current health needs of the young people. The fostering agency ensure that the placing social worker completes a full referral form prior to placement which includes details of the child/young person's health. Information from the placing authorities was limited in relation to past health needs, immunisations and childhood illnesses. The Directors confirmed that health assessments and plans had been requested from the placing authorities.

The fostering agency has developed a 'health passport' for each child and young person. Carers are expected to update this during the placement, recording any medication, medical, dental or optical appointments, immunisations and any illnesses.

Daily recording by foster carers, and supervising social worker supervision notes evidenced that carers take children to the doctors and ensure that any health needs are met. This includes taking young people to family planning where necessary, consultant appointments, and including support with personal hygiene. The agency has also linked with a local consultant for drug and alcohol issues, and has regular input from a consultant child and

adolescent psychiatrist, and a psychotherapist. The support from these specialists clearly assists the workers and carers understanding of the specialist health needs (emotional, psychological as well as physical) as well as maintaining stability of placements.

Files evidenced that medical consent had been obtained for each child/young person.

The agency is also currently piloting 'daily living plans' for each young person. These 'plans' detail the health needs of the child/young person, and the short term and long term action to improve health outcomes. These ensure the foster carers have a clear and understandable record of any action they need to take.

Carers receive training in meeting the needs of children and young people, which includes first aid, childhood illnesses, diseases, attachment issues, and child trauma.

The Director showed the inspector the monitoring records maintained, which included reports by foster carers detailing accidents and incidents involving the young people.

Following examination of carers case files and supervision notes the inspector did not see evidence that healthy eating was explored where necessary with carers. However, out of 14 questionnaire replies from young people six stated that they are "always" given advice and support about being healthy and eight stated that they are "usually" given this support. Placing social workers also confirmed that the carers were providing healthy environments for children. Out of the seven questionnaires received from social workers and other professionals, two stated that the fostering agency was "excellent" at enabling the child placed to be healthy and have healthy lifestyles, three said the agency was "good" (two did not answer the question). Information in the children's case files did evidence that children and young people were encouraged to be active and partake in sports. One young person stated about being healthy *"I go ice skating and horse riding and run around like a maniac"*.

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)

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following Standard(s):

3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30.

*Quality in this outcome area is **good**. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.*

Staff and management are suitably skilled and experienced, although slippages in following correct recruitment procedures could potentially affect the welfare of children.

There are good procedures in place to ensure appropriate matching of children's needs to carers' circumstances, however improvements are needed to ensure carers approval status is complied with.

The fostering agency's procedures and practice have not fully promoted or protected the welfare of children, although improvements are now being made to ensure children are in safe and nurturing environments.

The fostering assessment panel is attended by experienced people, who ensure that children are placed with good quality, suitable carers.

EVIDENCE:

Since the last inspection of Families First there has been a change in the ownership of the agency, with an additional Director joining and it becoming a limited company. Due to these legal changes there is a need for the organisation to re-apply for registration with the Commission who will reassess the suitability of the Providers to manage the fostering agency. The Directors confirmed that they did inform the Commission promptly of this change.

The fostering agency has been without a registered manager since June 2005. Since then two appointed managers have left the agency before completing their registration of 'fitness' to manage the service with the Commission. A further manager is currently in the process of being assessed for registration with the Commission. The lack of a consistent and registered manager has been offset by the Directors who work full time in the agency and have remained in day to day control of the agency. They have designated roles and responsibilities to ensure that all management and monitoring is completed effectively. The Director who is the named 'Responsible Individual' for the fostering agency has carried out this role for the past 5 years. She remains suitable to manage the fostering agency, having a range of experience in child care and knowledge of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. The Responsible Individual confirmed that she regularly updates her knowledge by attending conferences and seminars run by national agencies (BAAF, Association for Infant Mental Health). The Responsible Individual had a criminal record bureau check certificate in 2002, and this has not been updated yet.

The fostering agency continues to grow, with 47 fostering households now approved by the agency. The inspectors visited three foster carers as part of this inspection. Each foster home was adequately furnished and decorated, and the foster child had their own bedroom. Health and Safety assessments have been undertaken regularly, covering hazards and safety within the home. The health and safety assessments seen were varied in quality and depth, and not all had been dated or signed by the foster carers. Since the last inspection the Commission was informed by the manager that a carer was using locks/dead bolts on young people's bedrooms. Advice given by the Commission was that this was inappropriate and the agency took immediate action to remove the locks.

Referrals for foster carers for children and young people come from local authorities across England. The agency has recently introduced a new referrals system, to ensure better management and effectiveness. All referrals are directed to the agency manager, who liaises with the fostering manager over suitable matches. The supervising social workers confirmed that this system is much improved and that they are included in the decision making if it involves a fostering household they supervise. Local authorities are provided with a 'profile' of each fostering household that they consider to be an appropriate match. The agency also completes a 'matching form'. The inspector noted that this form is completed after the match is accepted, and the completed forms

seen did not truly reflect all circumstances of the match. For instance in two out of the three carer's case files examined the matching form did not accurately detail the carer's approval status, and how the child's circumstances were not consistent with this. Although the inconsistency related to a small age difference it was still important in relation to the match with the carer's own children, and there was no recorded acknowledgement of this. The carer's register also highlighted that two other carers currently had placements out of their approval status.

However in discussion with staff, managers and the directors, and by examining case files, matching is considered in line with the best interests of the child. A lot of the matching consideration is done verbally at the time of the referral. The records of referrals showed that many referrals are declined due to no appropriate match. The supervising social workers spoke of how positive the matches were with their foster carers, and that placement stability has been maintained at nearly 80% over the past 4 years. The three placing social workers spoken with confirmed that they considered the matches to be positive.

Children's files also evidenced that full and comprehensive information is obtained from the placing authorities prior to placing a child. A detailed referral form and an Individual Placement Plan is completed, and the 'looked after children' documentation obtained. Placement meetings are held with parents and / or previous carers (where appropriate), with social workers and agency representatives. Children are introduced flexibly with foster carers, and files evidenced that young people's views are sought. A Director informed the inspector that introductions to some long term carers, for a child with significant disabilities, has taken nearly 7 months to ensure the transition is smooth and in the child's best interests. Out of the 20 questionnaires received from carers the majority of carers considered the information they receive about a child is "excellent" or "good" (68%). Four replied that the information was "adequate" and two stated it was "poor" but further commented that this was because it was an emergency placement.

The supervising social worker now completes a risk assessment for each child placed with carers, highlighting areas of need such as aggressive behaviour, any sexual harmful behaviour, drugs and alcohol, absconding. This is good practice. These assessments make it clear what action foster carers are to take and how the agency is to help to minimise and support these behaviours/risks. Safe care plans for fostering households were seen on carer's files. These were not individualised to the carer's particular circumstances, and did not contain enough specific detail. For instance they stated "alcohol will be kept securely", which did not inform the reader where or how it will be stored.

Questionnaires were received from young people, and two stated that they were being bullied at school. The Directors confirmed that this would be discussed in supervision with the foster carers. However for one young person

who stated they were bullied the inspector saw no evidence that foster carers had been supported to cope with this on their case file. Incidences of bullying are not individually recorded or monitored, but again this is an area the agency manager is accepting needs developing.

The fostering agency have notified the Commission and local authorities promptly and appropriately following any significant events (including child protection allegations and investigations, accidents, illnesses and when a child is missing from placement). Since the last inspection there have been some child protection investigations relating to young people placed with the agency's carers. The inspector examined strategy meeting minutes, and case files which evidenced that the agency co-operated fully with the lead agency investigating the concerns and the placing authorities. However, there were practice areas where the fostering agency failed to safeguard children from harm and abuse. At one point four young people were placed with the same foster carers without an exemption being agreed by the local authority. Satisfactory consideration was not given to the needs of these young people, the suitability of the environment and risks of being placed together. The carer's suitability to foster was not annually reviewed, or a chronology of significant events/concerns logged centrally on the carer's case files. However the agency have reflected and analysed the practice, and worked alongside the local authority on looking at how future practice can be improved. One of the actions taken is for supervising social workers to ensure that children are seen and spoken to individually by themselves and by their social workers.

There has been a significant breach in complying with the regulations in relation to annual reviews of foster carers. Over three quarters of carers did not have an up to date review. Twenty-three reviews were over 6 months overdue, and fifteen were more than 12 months overdue. This shortfall has been recognised by the Directors and the inspector was informed that the agency plan for this year has been for all annual reviews of all carers to go to panel from October 2006 to June 2007. The Directors further confirmed that a clear programme is to be put in place for next year with all review information to be discussed monthly at the management team meeting.

Panel meeting minutes read of a case referred to the fostering panel because of concerns about the quality of care provided, did not show that best practice was followed. In discussion with the Directors this has now been acknowledged and further action is being taken to ensure that the agency's duty to safeguard children is followed. All carers have been given a copy of the Fostering Network guidance on "managing allegations and serious concerns about foster carers' practice or standards of care". The training programme for this year includes training on "the impact of abuse on child development", "child protection", and "behaviour management". An external training company provide this training. Supervising social workers also attend this training alongside the carers.

Each foster carer visited had a schedule of training and a training portfolio. They had been provided with certificates for each training course they attended. Training courses were considered varied and valuable by the carers, including for instance training in 'Court Room Experiences'.

Three sets of panel meeting minutes were examined and the panel chairperson was interviewed by phone. Panel sessions were well minuted. The independent panel members had a range of experience, with one being a foster carer, another a teacher, health visitor and another with social care background. The Directors confirmed that the fostering panel were robust and independent in their recommendations, and appropriately questioned any areas of practice or quality they considered necessary. The panel chairperson confirmed that where practice is challenged the agency addresses this promptly, and that the agency is considered professional and competent.

By examination of the last three panel session minutes, the inspector noted that panel members' attendance was not very regular, although the Directors confirmed 75% attendance had been maintained. However, the agency has recently appointed a new chair person and advertised for new independent members. The most recent member appointed, was appropriately checked with a criminal record bureau check and references being obtained. There were no fixed social workers named as panel members and no panel adviser. It is only recently that there is a set 'Agency Decision Maker' with this previously changing between a Director and a manager.

Panel members attend an annual panel development day, where they consider practice and procedures. New procedures were developed in May 2006. The panel administrator has attended the British Association of Adoption and Fostering training course. The Directors have also made themselves familiar with the BAAF's guide on 'Effective Panels'. There was no evidence shown to the inspector to show that management information about the agency is shared regularly with the panel. In discussion with the panel chairperson she was not aware that foster carer annual reviews were significantly out of date.

Staff recruitment and personnel files were examined by the inspector (those employed since the last inspection). Two assessments of newly approved foster carers were also examined in detail. These evidenced that criminal record bureau checks are received, and references obtained (including previous employer for staff and two personal references for foster carers). Written references are verified. However, where a person has previously worked with children and/or vulnerable adults verification of why this employment ended was not always obtained (for three of the five recently employed staff). No copy of proof of identity was seen on two of the recruitment files. Copies of qualifications and professional registration certificates were obtained appropriately.

As well as the range of experience in the supervising social work teams, the agency have three specialist consultants that are employed to give professional guidance with supporting staff, carers, children and young people. This includes a Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, a Psychotherapist and a drug and alcohol specialist. These consultants are also employed by other agencies and their personnel files were not examined at this inspection.

Of most importance is that the consultants are used effectively to maintain placement stability. These consultants offer advice and support to carers, helping them to understand the child's needs and behaviours and strategies to manage these. Case files evidenced that this support had been valued and been put to positive effect to promote stability for children.

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)

The Commission considers Standards 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

7 and 13 (31 is not currently applicable to this fostering agency)

*Quality in this outcome area is **good**. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.*

The fostering service is addressing issues of equality and diversity well, with workers and carers working hard to enhance children's confidence and self worth.

Good educational outcomes for children are achieved, with very good support provided to encourage children to reach their full potential.

EVIDENCE:

The educational need and attainment of children and young people is very well assessed and monitored. The case files read evidenced that the educational needs and goals of children are understood and recorded (with personal Education Plans, and Individual Education Plans being obtained, and / or recorded in the agency's own daily Living Plans). The Statement of Special Educational Needs were also obtained where necessary. Supervising social workers stated that they attend education meetings. Foster carer supervision records also evidenced that they support the child/young person with school issues (in relation to homework, risk of exclusions, supporting home tuition, transport issues to school). In discussions with foster carers they were able to articulate the value and importance of supporting the education. One of the directors confirmed that the agency is proactive in setting up education packages for when children who are out of school (work experience, on-line

learning, home tuition). The director spoke about liaising with the local education authority, and ensuring children's educational rights are met by the authority.

The agency have also developed a predictive risk assessment to be completed with all children and young people each term. This assessment indicates if there are any recent or future changes in educational setting for the child, any exclusions, truanting, or exams in order to predict and plan additional support for the child. Each child's Individual Placement Plan clearly states the expectations of the agency and foster carer in how they are to support the child's education. Children's case files also evidenced that children are encouraged to attend after school activities, sports clubs and leisure facilities. The children visited by the inspector confirmed that they can attend after school clubs and engage in leisure activities. Examples included fishing, skating, playing the drums.

Out of the 15 questionnaires received from young people, eight stated that they "always" receive the right help so they can be successful with their education, four stated they "usually" receive help, two said "sometimes" and one said "never". Five out of six social workers and professionals who answered the question stated that the agency was "excellent" or "good" at supporting the children in achieving educationally. Thirteen of the fifteen carers who responded to the question stated that the agency was "excellent" or "good" at supporting the children achieve educationally. This was further confirmed by carers who were visited by the inspector.

The inspector examined two recent form f assessments of prospective foster carers. These assessments covered areas of diversity and equality (in relation to caring for children who have a different culture, religion, language, ethnicity or disability). Anti-discriminatory practice is included in approval training, and post approval training. For instance the director spoke about the advance health training including caring for children with HIV or Hepatitis and the need to address prejudices, stigmatising and discrimination. Carers are assessed and approved where appropriate irrespective of sexuality, age, or marital status. A same sex couple are being presented to panel shortly and a new assessment is being undertaken on a single man. All children currently placed with carers are white British, with English being their first language. Where children have a specific disability, the supervising social workers confirmed that equipment is provided to support carers in meeting their needs. Notes of supervision sessions highlighted that carers are encouraged and given advice about increasing children's confidence and feelings of self-worth (with examples including encouraging children to integrate in local community and enabling independence through catching the bus to school, giving praise and reward, doing life story work).

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)

The Commission considers Standards 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

10 and 11

*Quality in this outcome area is **good**. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.*

The agency is good at seeking and responding to the views of young people, with children participating in decisions that affect their daily lives.

The agency is good at promoting safe contact between young people and their family, and actively ensure that contact plans are followed through.

EVIDENCE:

The children's case files examined by the inspector showed clear evidence of the contact arrangements and plans for the child (Daily Living Plans, Individual Placement Agreement, 'looked after children documentation'). Carer supervision records also evidenced that the supervising social worker discussed and reflected on the contact arrangements for the child. Carers were given advice and support in how to deal with any negative reactions to contact for the child.

Carers understood what was expected of them in relation to supporting the contact arrangements, and carers were involved in transport, supervision and assessment of contact. Social workers are provided with monthly reports on the progress made by children and young people, and this includes outcomes of fostering arrangements.

The agency recently forwarded all young people a questionnaire about the fostering service, inviting their comments on what has worked well and what they could do better. Comments were very positive from the young people. The agency's policy is also for the supervising social worker to see and talk to the young person in placement at least once a month. The young people visited by the inspector stated that they do know and see the supervising social worker. Fifteen young people forwarded a questionnaire to the Commission. Ten stated that their carers "always" listen and take notice of their opinions, and five said that they "usually" do. One young person stated that her foster carers "care about what I think".

The agency have also run a "children who foster" group, providing support, fun and advice to birth children. This is aimed at supporting the whole family, listening to the birth children as well as carers in order to maintain placements and provide a positive environment. The foster carers visited stated that their birth children are listened to very well and included in placement planning. Recent foster carer review documentation seen included the views of all children in placement (foster child and birth children).

Young people are provided with information packs about being fostered with Families First. These packs are still quite wordy and aimed at children who have adequate literacy skills. The agency has not consulted with young people on a wider level, in relation to gathering their input, feedback and views on systems and procedures. Consultation / participation events or days have not been organised. This has been considered by the fostering manager who is hoping to look at suitable ways of including young people in the agency's development.

Achieving Economic Wellbeing

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)

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

There are no key standards to assess in this section of the report. No concerns have been raised or identified in relation to these standards prior or during this inspection.

EVIDENCE:

Management

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)
- 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)

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

JUDGEMENT – we looked at outcomes for the following standard(s):

1, 2, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25. Standard 32 is not applicable to this fostering agency.

*Quality in this outcome area is **good**. This judgement has been made using available evidence including a visit to this service.*

The agency has a written Statement of Purpose and provides sufficient information to carers, children and other interested parties to enable them to make informed decisions.

The fostering staff undertake good quality assessments of carers, recruiting carers that can meet a range of children's needs. The agency has a very qualified and experienced staff team, providing a high level of support and guidance to foster carers that benefit children greatly.

The service is well managed and organised effectively, providing a clear and consistent service to carers and children.

Foster carers training is prioritised, with good quality and varied training providing carers with skills to meet the needs of children.

Case records for children are comprehensive, ensuring the appropriate information for carers is held. Carers' case files need to be better organised to ensure information required by regulation is maintained.

EVIDENCE:

There have been recent changes to the management structure of Families First, which is in response to the agency growing and also predetermining growth due to planning development of the services. As stated previously the three Directors remain actively involved and working full time in the agency. Each director has clear line management responsibility and designated roles. A manager has just been appointed for the service as a whole, and this proposed registered manager is responsible for two further managers and teams: the fostering team and the parent and child assessment team. The parent and child assessment team involves assessing, training and supporting foster carers to provide these specialist placements (which includes assessments for courts). This team consists of a manager, a supervising social worker and a family support worker. At the time of this inspection there were four parent and child placements with the agency.

There is a fostering manager who line manages five supervising social workers and a family support worker. The supervising social workers interviewed stated that they have confidence in the management structure and that there are clear lines of accountability. The fostering manager was considered competent, and very accessible. The caseloads of the supervising social workers interviewed ranged between six and nine fostering households and one or two form f assessments. This was reported as being very manageable and allowed for a high level of support to be provided to carers. The team morale was stated as being high, with the agency reported to encouraging open communication and including all staff in decision making. A foster carer visited

stated that Families First feels like it has a flat management system with foster carers feeling included and equal in decision-making.

The agency has regular team meetings and management meetings. Staff have annual appraisals and probation periods, and all staff spoken with reported that they have monthly supervision with their line manager.

Three fostering households were visited as part of this inspection. The foster carers visited were particularly positive about Families First. No concerns or grumbles were mentioned about the agency. They stated that the support was extensive, including very regular visits (once a week at the start of a placement and then at least once a month) and frequent telephone calls. The foster carers stated that a supervising social worker could always be contacted out of hours and in an emergency. They confirmed that the support from the specialist consultants (psychiatrist, psychotherapist) was very accessible and provided "at a drop of a hat" when needed. The majority of foster carer questionnaires received were also positive about Families First. Thirteen out of twenty who replied stated that Families First was "excellent" at supporting them care for the child. Five stated the agency was "good" and two said they were "adequate" at supporting them. One foster carer commented they are "always there for us".

However evidence of regular supervision visits and telephone calls to carers was not evidenced on the written case files or electronic system. For instance for a very difficult placement which lasted three months, the carers file only evidenced two home visits. Only one supervision or home visit was recorded since a new placement made three months ago.

Another carers case file (and electronic system) seen showed evidence of only three supervision visits in a year. However, in discussion with the carers, supervising social workers, fostering manager and directors they all confirmed that supervision and/or home visits are undertaken routinely and regularly. Some supervision of carers notes are held on the child's file. As there is no regulatory reason to keep these files it is important that all records relating to carers are kept in the one case file.

The inspector also noted that carers' case files did not contain an adequate or accurate record of the children that have been placed with them. Children receiving respite were not always recorded on the electronic record or case file. Some entry details were also missing (for example the reason the placement ended, or the date it ended). This is a breach in regulation. A further breach is that carers or case files did not all have a copy of an up to date foster care agreement. This document needs to accurately present the carer's approval status. The agency currently keep 'foster care agreements' and foster carer annual review reports in a separate file. These documents however need to be held in the one central foster carer case file/record.

Some supervising social workers were not clearly recording home visits or telephone calls to foster carers. The type, purpose or outcome of the contact was not clear in the handwritten notes. Records of complaints against carers were also not clearly recorded on carers' files. The recording of supervision visits however has recently been changed, with an improved structure of recording separately the child's needs and outcomes and the carers needs and support.

Children's files contained all the assessment, placement planning and care plan documentation. Monthly summaries were recorded which are reported back to the placing authority, and carers daily records are also kept on the file. The written details kept on files varied, with some including a comprehensive record of events, while other records were limiting and did not give a clear picture of the child's stay with foster carers. Incidents and accidents to children were well recorded, using specific forms and action taken clearly recorded. Life story work is being encouraged by the fostering agency, with carers being provided with training and support to undertake this important work. The foster carers visited were all storing information securely.

The staff team are very well qualified and experienced. All staff have many years experience in a range of child care social work (including child protection, family placement, drugs and alcohol, adolescent mental health, guardian ad litem work). Supervising social workers and family support workers are all qualified social workers. The staff, managers and directors all articulated very child centred practice, and a commitment to providing the best for children. Where staff considered they needed extra training or knowledge they confirmed that the agency provided training opportunities and encouraged new learning. The case holding staff have support from administrative staff, and have easy access to computers and other office equipment.

The Directors confirmed that new staff are to attend BAAF training in assessment. The supervising social workers confirmed that training opportunities are plentiful and valued by the agency. All but one worker has completed the PQ 1 (initial post qualifying course for social workers), with one other worker planning to do this shortly.

Files evidenced that carers had been given a handbook which covers policies, procedures and guidance. Staff also have a detailed handbook. Procedures are updated when needed. For instance the procedures for dealing with allegations and complaints has been amended following new good practice guidance from Fostering Network and DFES.

There are monthly support groups for carers. One has recently started in Plymouth due to the number of carers being recruited around that area. A further support group runs for the carers in North Devon and the one from South Devon. Two of these support groups are facilitated by the consultant child and adolescent psychotherapist. Carers also are able to have respite care

when needed, and supervising social workers stated that a high priority is given to ensuring children only have respite when needed and with other carers they know.

Foster carers are recruited by word of mouth and by recruitment advertisements in local papers. Although no base line of skill or experience is specified in the recruitment advertisement the directors confirmed that suitable applicants are screened from the initial enquiry information. The agency is tending to continue with the assessments of carers who do have relevant experience, and no young children at home but acknowledge that this is not a set rule as there are some excellent carers who do not fit into this category. Two recent form f assessments were examined. The assessments were comprehensive and covered good practice recommendations. The inspector was informed that the quality of assessments is being monitored, and less sessional staff are being used to carry out assessments.

See 'Staying Safe' section in relation to comments about out of date annual reviews of carers, and the need to ensure better compliance with foster carers approval status.

The Statement of Purpose has recently been amended to ensure it better reflects the agency's services and functions. There is a need however to include more specific information on how foster carers are recruited, assessed and supervised.

SCORING OF OUTCOMES

This page summarises the assessment of the extent to which the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services have been met and uses the following scale.

4 Standard Exceeded (Commendable) 3 Standard Met (No Shortfalls)
 2 Standard Almost Met (Minor Shortfalls) 1 Standard Not Met (Major Shortfalls)

"X" in the standard met box denotes standard not assessed on this occasion
 "N/A" in the standard met box denotes standard not applicable

BEING HEALTHY	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
12	3

STAYING SAFE	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
3	3
6	3
8	2
9	3
15	2
30	2

ENJOYING AND ACHIEVING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
7	3
13	4
31	N/a

MAKING A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
10	3
11	3

ACHIEVING ECONOMIC WELLBEING	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
14	X
29	X

MANAGEMENT	
<i>Standard No</i>	<i>Score</i>
1	3
2	X
4	X
5	X
16	4
17	4
18	X
19	3
20	3
21	1
22	2
23	3
24	3
25	2
26	X
27	X
28	X
32	N/a

Are there any outstanding requirements from the last inspection? NO

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 Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider(s) must comply with the given timescales.

No.	Standard	Regulation	Requirement	Timescale for action
1.	FS8	34	The fostering service must ensure that a child is only placed with a foster parent if the terms of his approval are consistent with the proposed placement.	30/04/07
2.	FS15	20	The fostering service provider must not employ a person to work for the fostering service unless it obtains full and satisfactory information as listed in Schedule 1. <i>In particular this refers to the need to have a copy of the persons positive proof of identity including a recent photograph. Also, where a person has previously worked in a position whose duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, so far as reasonably practicable verification of the reason why the employment ended needs to be obtained.</i>	30/04/07
3	FS21	29	A review of each foster carer must take place not more than a year after approval, and	30/06/07

			<p>thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year.</p> <p>The fostering service must on the occasion of the first review, and may on subsequent review, refer its report to the fostering panel for consideration.</p>	
4.	FS22	28(5)	<p>The fostering service must enter into a written agreement with each foster carer covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the foster care agreement).</p> <p><i>In particular this refers to the need to ensure that each carer has an up to date foster care agreement, which accurately reflects their approval status.</i></p>	30/05/07
5.	FS25	30	<p>The fostering service must maintain a case record for each foster parent approved by it which shall include copies of the information specified in paragraph 2 and 3.</p> <p><i>(In particular this refers to the need to have a copy of the notice of approval, the foster care agreement, any report of a review of approval and recommendations made by the fostering panel in the case file).</i></p> <p>The case record must also contain a record of each placement with the foster carer, including the name, age and sex of the child, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstances of the termination.</p> <p><i>(In particular this refers to the</i></p>	30/05/07

			<i>need to ensure all placement records are accurate, up to date and include each respite placement).</i>	
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RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations relate to National Minimum Standards and are seen as good practice for the Registered Provider/s to consider carrying out.

No.	Refer to Standard	Good Practice Recommendations
1.	FS3	The responsible individual should have a renewed criminal record bureau check every three years.
2	FS8	The fostering agency should consider revising the 'matching form' used, to ensure it provides a useful tool in assessing the carers who are capable of meeting the child's needs.
3.	FS9	Safe caring plans should be individualised for each fostering household, and updated at the start of each new placement. The agency should ensure that bullying incidents involving the children are recorded in a way that can be easily monitored, and highlighting the action taken.
4	FS21	Supervising social workers should keep clear records of telephone contacts, home visits and supervision sessions, with these kept up to date on foster carers' case files.
5.	FS23	The agency should ensure that where carers are jointly registered, both should undertake all the training required, and be able to attend support sessions. This is repeated from the previous inspection dated November 2004 and February 2006.
6.	FS30	There should be clearer membership of the panel, with an agreed membership list that includes the two named social workers. Foster panels should receive regular management information about the outcome of foster carer's annual

		reviews.
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