

Pathway Care (Midlands)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Jacqueline Dunster
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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

Pathway Care is an independent fostering agency made up of a number of individually registered regional services. These services provide care for around 600 children and young people across England and Wales. The Cardiff office retains senior management, finance and human resources functions.

Pathway Care (Midlands) is one of the regional services. It was first registered in February 2004 and is based in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire.

At the time of the inspection Pathway Care supported 108 foster carers with 122 children and young people in placement.

Most of Pathway Care (Midlands) placements provide mainstream foster care, including long term, short term, permanency and bridging placements. Emergency placements can be provided. The service also offers placements for disabled children and young people and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

A range of views from 29 children and young people, 48 foster carers and 14 social workers contributed to the inspection through surveys and discussion.

Summary

During this full inspection which was announced, all key standards were inspected. The inspection covered all outcome areas from the Every Child Matters framework. The inspection assessed the capacity of the service to promote equality and diversity.

An external professional stated in a survey: 'The carers provide a high standard of care to the young persons in their care. The environment is of a very high standard and all young persons are happy, safe and self-assured.' Children and young people achieve good and excellent outcomes because the fostering service has high expectations of the standard of care and nurture to be provided by its foster carers. At the same time, it offers excellent support, supervision and training to enable the foster carers to meet these high expectations.

Children and young people are provided with excellent support to improve their health and develop healthy lifestyles. They receive high quality care to keep them safe at home and in the community, to support them to fully enjoy their lives and to have a meaningful say in their care. The fostering service provides excellent support to ensure all children and young people have equal access to services and opportunities. Children and young people receive good support to achieve their educational potential and to acquire independence skills. The management of the service fully supports the work which staff and foster carers undertake. One foster carer represented a large number of those surveyed by stating: 'Since I have worked for Pathway I have been amazed at their caring and professional manner and have not hesitated in recommending them.'

The service is recommended to make a minor change to its management of the children's register to ensure it provides all the information in one easily accessible place.

There are a number of areas of exemplary practice in this service which are considered worthy of dissemination to other services. These include the foster carer recruitment practices, the involvement of foster carers in the probationary reviews of new staff, the engagement of foster children and children who foster in developing the service and the willingness of the provider to address shortfalls in the practice of foster carers and staff with rigour and urgency.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection the provider was required to ensure the children's register included the child's address on leaving placement. The staff now record this information but are further recommended to ensure all the information relating to the register is retained together in one place. This is necessary to ensure the required information is easily accessible.

The provider has implemented a recommendation to ensure foster carers store medication safely in their homes by requiring it to be stored in a locked cabinet and checking this is done so throughout the year. This increases safeguards to protect children and young people from risks in the home.

The monitoring of the quality of assessments has improved as recommended. Where weaknesses are identified in the performance of assessors these are addressed without delay. Senior staff closely manage the assessments and the fostering panel examines them robustly. As a result, there is more likelihood of approving the right people to be foster carers. This increases the chances of children and young people living with foster carers who can meet their needs.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

A social worker commented on one carer: 'They demonstrate a high degree of diligence in ensuring the child's health needs are met.' This is typical of the views of social workers who place children and young people in the care of this service's foster carers.

Staff take care to place children and young people with foster carers who can meet their health needs. Where children and young people have very specific needs in relation to disability, ethnicity or culture, foster carers are provided with additional training and support to meet these needs. Surveys were returned from 28 children and young people for the inspection, of these, 21 children and young people said foster carers always meet their health needs and six said they usually do so.

Foster carers attend a range of training relating to both physical and emotional health of children and young people. This equips them to provide effective support for mental health issues, attachment disorders, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, sexual health, first aid and substance misuse. There are examples of foster carers using the knowledge and skills they have developed to support asylum seeking young people through post traumatic stress and to provide emergency first aid to children. Foster carers receive support from supervising social workers to develop confidence in dealing with health professionals and in advocating for foster children. They also have access to support from a therapist who has particular expertise in attachment disorders. Foster carers help children and young people to understand how to look after and protect their own health. As a result of these practices,

children and young people receive excellent support in developing good health and healthy lifestyles.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

Of the 28 children and young people who responded to the inspection surveys, all but one said they always feel cared for by their foster carers. They feel safe in their placements. Responses included: 'The carers are the best' and 'I feel cared for because it is so loving and I love it. I think it is like my home.' These responses are consistent with the views children and young people provide to the fostering service when their foster carers are going through annual reviews of suitability. They provide a picture of a fostering service where children and young people can feel confident they will be cared for in a way which makes them feel safe and keeps them safe from harm. This is achieved because the fostering service chooses the right foster carers and staff and foster carers understand and implement policies and procedures designed to promote safe care of children.

The provider operates safe staff recruitment procedures which ensure that all who work for the service are suitable to do so and have the qualifications and skills to undertake their roles. Staff are subject to induction, probation and appraisal to ensure they continue to be suitable to work with children who are fostered. The provider demonstrates excellent practice in ensuring matters relating to the professional competence of members of staff are addressed. The provider has introduced an innovative approach to the probationary assessment of new staff by seeking the views of foster carers on the conduct of the member of staff. This provides a much more comprehensive picture of how the member of staff carries out their day-to-day work and understands their role. These practices reduce the likelihood of children and young people being exposed to those who could cause them harm.

The staff team at Pathway Care (Midlands) includes social workers and support staff with a wide range of backgrounds and experience. They have an excellent knowledge of fostering and child development. They have a broad range of skills and expertise. As a result, foster carers and children receive support and guidance from staff who have the necessary skills.

Staff ensure foster homes are suitable for the children and young people placed in them. They achieve this through regular health and safety checks, unannounced visits, relevant training for foster carers and provision of safety packs for homes. Homes visited during the inspection were warm, welcoming and comfortable. They provide a home environment where children and young people can feel safe and relaxed. This is consistent with the views expressed by children and young people during the inspection.

A placing social worker stated in a survey: 'The young person seems content, motivated, happy in placement with the carer. They are evidencing all areas of emotional, social, educational, physical and practical stimulation for the young person. I feel the agency have matched my young person to a suitable carer.' The service now operates a distinct referrals team. The staff in this team are responsible for ensuring children and young people are only placed with carers who can meet their specific needs. Staff carry out risk assessments and evaluate need. Where there are gaps in the match between a foster carer and a child which can be addressed through additional support and training, this is identified at the start of the process.

For example, a young unaccompanied asylum seeker could not be placed with a carer who was an exact match in terms of ethnicity and language. The young person was placed with a foster carer who had a very similar cultural and religious heritage and a first language which had much in common with that of the young person. The foster carer supports the young person to access services and peer support from people from their own community. At the same time, the foster carer offers excellent experience and skills in education which assist the young person in their wish to develop use of English and achieve educationally. Through careful matching the young person is living with a foster carer who can support them to retain their own identity and history but acquire the skills and knowledge to live in Britain. Social workers in Pathway Care (Midlands) fully understand that it is critical to ensure children and young people are only placed with foster carers who can meet their needs. Foster carers understand their specific responsibilities for the individual children they care for. As a result of this practice, children and young people live in stable placements and thrive in all areas of their well-being.

Staff and foster carers have an excellent understanding of their duties in relation to safeguarding children and young people from abuse and neglect. Staff are rigorous in reporting concerns to the relevant authorities without delay. Both staff and foster carers attend regular training on safeguarding. The provider demonstrates excellent practice in fully assessing the suitability of foster carers to continue fostering where an allegation has been made against them but the local authority or police have decided against further action. These practices increase safeguards designed to protect children and young people from those who may harm them.

Foster carers help children and young people to develop their ability to protect themselves from harm. A social worker stated to the inspection: 'The foster carers provide a safe, nurturing environment. They have educated the young person on safety around the home and personal safety in and outside the family home.' Safer caring policies are used to help children and young people to understand how they can protect themselves in the home. Foster carers advise and support children and young people on how to keep safe outside the home. Foster carers also support children and young people to protect themselves from bullying at school and in the community. They advocate for children where they see risks to their well-being. As a result of this practice, children and young people reported to the inspection that they can share their worries with their foster carers and feel safe.

A fostering panel which includes a range of independent members as well as staff from Pathway Care (Midlands) considers assessments of applicants to foster and the continued suitability to foster of those who have already been approved. The panel membership includes those with a background in child health, education and children's services. There is also a member who has direct experience of being fostered. The members of panel are skilled and knowledgeable and are guided by a very experienced chair who has high expectations of the quality of assessment required. The panel members are robust in their consideration of applications. They do not recommend approval unless they have been given all the required information. The chair of panel reports any concerns about the quality of assessments to the service's managers. Managers take the concerns seriously and implement measures to address the shortfalls. The robust practices in considering the suitability of foster carers contributes to excellent practice in only placing children and young people with carers who are fit and able to meet their needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

A social worker told the inspection: 'Young people are given support in maintaining a good level of behaviour both in placement and in the local community. Young people are encouraged to have a positive attitude towards people of different faiths, cultures, races and respect our differences.' Staff understand that each child or young person may experience discrimination, lack of equal opportunity or access to services for a wide range of reasons. As a result, staff have developed practices which support children and young people to overcome these barriers to success and inclusion.

The recruitment officer has developed strategies to ensure foster carers are recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds and with a wide range of skills. This enables staff to place children and young people in families who closely match their backgrounds and needs.

Staff seek to include all children and young people in activities and forums. The development of an activity group for disabled children and young people offers an excellent opportunity for staff to listen to the views of these children and young people. It also offers an opportunity for the children and young people to thoroughly enjoy themselves and make friendships. Foster carers attend training on supporting diversity and building self-esteem. Staff promote the uniqueness and individuality of each child and young person. As a result of these excellent practices, children and young people can be confident they will live with foster carers who show respect for them and support them to overcome barriers to achieving their full potential.

The provider expects foster carers to act as a good parent to children and young people in relation to education. They are supported to find the right educational placements for children and young people, to attend meetings, to liaise with teachers and support workers, to support learning in the home and to advocate for children and young people. Foster carers contributing to the inspection showed a good understanding of their role in supporting children and young people to achieve their educational potential. The quality assurance manager monitors the educational outcomes of children and young people. Outreach workers provide additional support in relation to education. All educational achievements are celebrated which helps to increase the aspirations of children and young people to do well in their education.

An excellent example of a lengthy piece of work to support educational achievement was seen during the inspection. The work was undertaken to identify the right school for a young person, support them through the transition to the new school and to support them to remain in school despite extremely challenging behaviour. This work involved foster carers, the child, the supervising social worker, the therapist and the school working closely together to ensure the young person has the best possible chance of success in their new school. This excellent example has formed part of evidence presented to a government body in relation to this area of practice. Children and young people report they are given support to do well at school and college. The work of staff and foster carers ensures children and young people achieve good and outstanding outcomes in relation to education.

Foster carers and staff offer excellent support for children and young people to participate in the community and to develop their talents and interests. The uniqueness of each child or young person is recognised and plans made to meet their individual needs and hopes. This work helps children and young people to enjoy their lives, develop their talents and make friendships which is important for their confidence and sense of achievement.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people receive excellent support to keep in contact with their families. Staff make sure they know what the arrangements for contact are at the point of referral and place children and young people with foster carers who are able to support the contact arrangements. Foster carers receive training and supervision on the role and importance of contact. Outstanding examples were seen during the inspection of foster carers who go well beyond what is expected of them to help children and young people develop more positive relationships with their parents, brothers and sisters. These excellent practices assist children and young people to experience improved relationships with their families. This contributes to their emotional well-being and ability to trust other people as they go through life.

Pathway Care (Midlands) is a child focused organisation which values the views and opinions of children and young people. Children and young people reported to the inspection that their foster carers listen to them and ask their views. There are opportunities and forums for foster children to meet together to discuss their views and ways the service could improve. These have resulted in the introduction of an excellent carer profile which can be shared with children and young people to help them prepare for a placement, changes to the children's guide to make it more user-friendly and changes to the activities programmes offered by the service.

The development of a support group for children who foster recognises the challenges faced by these children and young people as well as how critical they are to the success of placements. This demonstrates positive action to support all those within the fostering family. Staff and foster carers support children and young people to speak up about their views and opinions on their foster carers, the service and the wider care system. They are encouraged to take part in education and care reviews and to give their opinions to the foster carers' annual reviews. This year young people received support to take part in the reception for the Associate Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. These activities increase children and young people's self-esteem and aspiration. They provide children and young people with a voice on the issues which concern them.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Foster carers and staff attend training on preparing young people for independence. They understand that day-to-day care should include building skills for independence. Foster carers visited during the inspection placed a strong emphasis on the need to equip young people with the skills they will need to make a successful transition to adulthood. Foster carers help children and young people to develop domestic, personal care, budgeting, employment and social skills. They advocate for young people's views about their future accommodation. There are numerous examples of foster carers who continue to provide support and accommodation for care leavers as they recognise the importance of stability for these young people at a time of transition into colleges or work places. As a result of the good practice of staff and foster carers, young people are receiving the care and guidance which increases their chances of living successfully as an independent adult.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

Foster carers, children, supervising social workers and placing social workers understand how the service works, its goals and ethos. This is because the provider makes available a Statement of Purpose, accessible information for children and policies and procedures which clearly outline these aims and objectives. Children and young people, their families and their social workers are provided with the right information to enable them to make the right decision about whether the service can meet their needs.

Excellent monitoring and quality assurance practices ensure that staff and foster carers do what they say they are going to do, that goals are reached and the quality of care provided to children and young people is continually improved.

Clear staff structures ensure everyone understands their role and responsibilities and foster carers know who can deal with particular issues they have. Social workers are available for support and reassurance around the clock. As a result of these practices, foster carers feel confident about accessing support when they need it.

Staff are well-qualified and experienced. They attend a wide range of core training and have access to individualised programmes of training in line with their development goals. They demonstrate thoughtful and reflective approaches to their own development and that of the agency. This results in a fostering service which does not stand still but continues to look for ways to improve the care provided to children and young people.

Likewise foster carers show high levels of commitment to developing their knowledge and skills through attendance at training and carer forums. Again, where there are individual needs for specific training the provider ensures foster carers are able to access this. Foster carers demonstrate commitment to supervision and support. They almost invariably stated in the inspection that the supervision and support they receive from staff is, 'Second to none.' Supervision and support was identified as one of the most important successes of this agency throughout the inspection. Foster carers feel being able to trust the social workers to be there for them allows them to focus their attention on the children. A number of foster carers agreed that their social workers anticipate when they need support rather than waiting for the foster carer to go to them.

Excellent recruitment strategies ensure social workers are able to offer foster carers who can meet the specific needs of individual children and young people. Staff are sensitive to changes in referral patterns and the types of carers being sought by local authorities. The recruitment officer is able to respond to these changing needs effectively. The provider has developed an innovative contract with another organisation who can effectively screen applicants to foster. This offers the recruitment officer the opportunity to make very early contact with those expressing an interest in fostering. The recruitment officer then completes an in-depth first meeting with the applicants prior to commencement of any assessment. The result of these changes to practice has been a more effective and streamlined approach to recruitment which reduces the likelihood of unsuitable candidates progressing too far through the system. At the same time it supports good candidates to move forward without delay. In feedback from foster carers to the inspection a number mentioned the responsiveness of the service to their early enquiries as the reason they had decided to apply to this particular agency to be a foster carer.

A minor change is necessary to the recording of information relating to the children's register to ensure the information is easily accessible. However, high standards of recording are achieved

by staff and foster carers. Files are comprehensive and relevant. They provide an excellent account of the child's journey through foster care. This information is supplemented by the provision of memory boxes to children and young people and a clear expectation that foster carers will support children and young people to understand and record their life so far. The records support effective, well-managed work with foster carers, children and young people.

Children and young people's social workers almost all reported that the staff and foster carers communicate effectively with them, resulting in consistent and well-planned approaches to caring for the children and young people. One social worker described the agency as friendly and approachable.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. Staff and foster carers see each child and young person as unique with different needs and histories. They support children and young people to develop confidence in their own identity and develop respect for others. They support children and young people to overcome barriers to their participation in their own communities. Foster carers help children and young people to meet their religious and cultural obligations and to understand their own heritage. Foster carers and staff offer opportunities for disabled children and young people to access resources and opportunities which make their lives enjoyable and help them achieve their potential. Staff and foster carers are developing an understanding of the complex issues relating to caring for unaccompanied asylum seeking children. At the same time they support these children and young people to understand the culture and country in which they have sought refuge and provide them with the skills to live in Britain. These outstanding practices enable staff and foster carers to meet the diverse needs of children and young people and to offer equal opportunities for all children and young people to achieve their goals and potential.

The organisation and management of the fostering service securely underpins the outstanding work with children and young people.

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
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Recommendations

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

- ensure the administrative records gather together all information relating to the children's register in a single document. (NMS 25.1)