

Families First (SW) Independent Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Jennifer Reed
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Setting address	Glentor, Balland Lane, Ashburton, Devon, TQ13 7DA
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Telephone number	01626333787
Email	
Registered person	Families First (South West) Limited
Registered manager	Vacant
Responsible individual	Gareth Bonar Walton
Date of last inspection	27/07/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Families First (South West) Limited is an independent fostering service which merged with the Pathway Care Group in 2007. Pathway Care are owned by Acorn Care and Education Limited which is a national child care organisation providing fostering, children's homes and educational provision. The fostering agency is based in Ashburton, Devon. Pathway Care operates a joint fostering panel for its Ashburton and Bristol fostering services. The panel is independently chaired and meets each month.

The majority of its foster carers are recruited from within Somerset, Devon, Plymouth, Torbay and Cornwall. The service has recruited 10 new fostering households in the past 12 month period. The service provides a range of placements which include: emergency; short term; long term; permanence; sibling groups; and parent and child placements. The service does not offer short-term breaks.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service provides 50 fostering households and has 61 children and young people in placement.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This is a good fostering service with some outstanding features. Children and young people thrive and make excellent progress while living in their foster homes, given their starting points on admission. Placement stability is a particular strength of this service, alongside well-considered matching processes, resulting in the provision of safe and secure placements for children and young people.

Good recruitment and preparation of foster carers results in the provision of competent foster carers who are able to effectively meet the individual needs of the children and young people, parents and children they care for, or assess.

The fostering service works robustly with local services, commissioners and placing authorities to ensure children and young people are safeguarded and their identified needs are met. Care plans are effectively implemented, resulting in outstanding outcomes for many of the children and young people in placement.

Leadership and management of the service are outstanding, demonstrating high aspirations for children and young people who are fostered. The organisation's clear lines of delegated responsibility and accountability provide an effective framework to monitor the quality of the service and the progress and outcomes of children and young people, and parent and child placements. The Registered Manager's post has been vacant for a two week period, prior to this inspection.

Areas for further development identified at this inspection are in respect of the membership of the fostering panel, and the provision of more written detail in two separate areas of reporting.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
26 (2011)	obtain the information specified in Part 1 of Schedule3; in particular, with regard to point 5, particulars of their accommodation, with reference to the suitability of the premises for differing types of fostering placements (Regulation 26 (1A) (a))	30/04/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider (NMS 14.8)
- ensure supervision offers a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills; in particular, ensure there are written transfer summaries in place when carers' placements change to/from fostering children and young people and providing parent and child placements. resulting in a change of supervising social worker. (NMS 21.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people benefit from the exceptional placement stability provided by this fostering service. They feel very much a part of their fostering family household and they enjoy and thrive living in their homes. Some children and young people are placed with their brothers and sisters and their attachments are not disrupted. Foster carers work sensitively with birth families to ensure children and young people maintain positive contact with their families. Children and young people feel safe and their sense of security and belonging helps them build trusting relationships with their foster carers and develop secure attachments within the foster family. One social worker summarised this by saying, 'they are kept safe and now they are a happy child who wants to live there forever.'

Their secure base underpins the excellent progress children and young people make and sustain in their personal, emotional and social development. They are willing to risk trying out new things, for example, taking part in leisure activities with other young people. They attend Brownies and Cubs, go on camps, go horse-riding and take part in drama productions. Their participation often helps them to make new friendships and to successfully integrate within their local area. They enjoy having friends come round to play, stay for meals, sleep-over at their house, or alternatively, be invited to spend time at their friends' homes. They are able to be just like any other child or young person and are not stigmatised for being a child in care.

Their lives are enriched by the wide range of activities they undertake and the encouragement and praise they receive from their foster carers for their involvement and achievements. These factors underpin the development of new skills and talents which help children and young people to increase their confidence and self-esteem, supporting them to make positive changes in their lives. Social workers highlight examples of children and young people's progress by saying, 'the young person's level of aggression has reduced significantly and they have lots more fun;' and, ' they look a lot less anxious and have developed a sense of humour.'

Children and young people's well-being is enhanced by the service's robust approach

to ensuring their emotional and physical health needs are well met. A social worker reported the exceptional progress one young person with disabilities had made in exceeding by far, the professional team's expectations of them reaching developmental milestones.

Children and young people regularly attend their schools and colleges. They receive excellent and innovative support and encouragement from their foster carers and fostering staff members to help them in their learning. Their education is enriched by the additional learning activities they provide beyond the school day and by their advocacy to secure educational funding to provide extra tuition, or music lessons. One professional said, 'this is a fantastic placement; the young person has come on so far in their general well-being, and in their education. They have progressed in their reading by two levels in one term instead of achieving this over the year as is expected.'

Children and young people have opportunities to be involved in the development of the fostering service. They interview staff, help in the training of foster carers, and join participation groups to share information about the fostering service with others. These experiences encourage children and young people to speak up about matters that are important to them and to be heard. Young people feel empowered and valued by these processes and they gain in confidence and independence, preparing them for successfully moving towards adulthood.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The service benefits from the expertise of knowledgeable professionals within the wider organisation who provide a robust approach to the local recruitment of foster carers. Referrals to the service are monitored to identify the needs of local placing authorities for differing types of placements for children and young people, including 'staying put' and parent and child placements. The service also gathers information of unmet need to inform its recruitment strategy, resulting in the service striving to provide a range of foster carers who are able to meet the diverse and complex needs of children and young people, and parent and child placements.

Assessments are carried out by qualified social workers and their written reports generally provide an informative and evaluative account of prospective fostering households. Foster carers participate in the 'Skills to Foster' preparation training and then undertake the Training, Support and Development Standards in foster care. 70% of foster carers have completed this training within a year of their approval.

The organisation's recent learning and development programme provides foster carers with a clear, learning pathway that provides graduated learning opportunities across a wide range of relevant subjects. Foster carers report that this is a great improvement, as they can now make significant progress in their learning and the high quality training they receive helps to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to meet the needs of children and young people they care for. Those

foster carers providing parent and child placements undertake specialist training in this area and receive supervision and support from dedicated supervising social workers.

Foster carers receive regular supervision from qualified supervising social workers; they commend the high quality of the support they receive and the accessibility of workers and the out of hours support service. They feel very much a part of the professional team and are fully involved in placement planning. Comments made by foster carers included; 'the Registered Manager and my supervising social worker have been wonderful; they are both so knowledgeable and supportive and I have been able to discuss anything with them;' and, 'I can always get hold of someone at any time for advice and they are always helpful.'

At various times, some foster carers provide differing placements, for example, placements for teenagers or parent and child placements. However, when they change from one type of placement to another, and the supervising social worker changes to provide the necessary skills to support the placement, no written transfer summary of supervision is completed and agreed with the foster care, as is good practice. This shortfall has the potential to reduce the effectiveness of the supervision framework to monitor and assess foster carers' performance and to support the development of their competencies and skills.

The fostering service operates a joint panel with its organisation's Bristol based service. Panel members benefit from access to good quality training arranged by the service. The panel is robustly chaired by an experienced person. It provides a good quality assurance function and makes sound recommendations to the agency decision maker regarding the suitability of prospective and continuing fitness of approved foster carers. The panel chair offers appropriate challenge to the fostering agency and this contributes to the provision of safe and stable placements for children and young people. However, the central list of panel members has gradually declined as individual member's availability and attendance has reduced over the past year. Panel meetings held in the last 12 month period mostly consist of just five panel members whose backgrounds do not always provide a sufficiently diverse range of knowledge and expertise. This reduces the competency of the panel to make effective decisions in children and young people's best interests.

An independent reviewing officer also chairs some annual reviews of foster carers. This independent oversight provides additional challenge and scrutiny of the standard of care provided to children and young people by the service and contributes to raising quality of care and outcomes for children and young people.

Placing social workers report that the service provides, 'amazing carers who have gone above and beyond what is expected of them;' and describe placements as 'fantastic.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering service works within the organisation's well developed safeguarding policies and procedures. Due regard is given to making sure that the service's policies are congruent with local safeguarding and missing protocols and Local Safeguarding Children Board guidance. Safeguarding issues or allegations arising within the service have been promptly and competently dealt with by managers, who have appropriately referred matters and worked collaboratively with other relevant safeguarding agencies to ensure children, young people and parents are protected.

The organisation operates a Safeguarding Panel which meets regularly to monitor any safeguarding concerns, to ensure that everyone is kept safe from harm. Monthly child progress reports also monitor health and education outcomes, missing episodes and compliancy with care plans. This information helps to highlight where extra or specialist help may be required to provide effective support to individual children and young people and this contributes to reducing risk and keeping them safe. The number of children and young people going missing from their placements within this service is slightly below the national comparator figure for all independent fostering agencies for the period April 2013 to March 2014; however, the duration of missing episodes for this period is higher.

Foster carers attend mandatory training in safeguarding and demonstrate a good knowledge of child protection issues, including the risk of child sexual exploitation. They understand the impact of past abuse and neglect in children and young people's lives and know how to respond to any arising child protection issue or disclosure made to them. The work sensitively and at the individual's pace to help children and young people deal with their emotions and issues, resulting in strong and effective relationships being established between most children and young people and their foster carers.

The fostering service's well organised operation contributes to keeping children, young people and parents safe. The service makes sure that all relevant information pertaining to children, young people and parents is gathered to enable the effective matching of placements, and the provision of foster carers who have the necessary skills to safely support the placements made. A regularly updated safer caring policy, behaviour management plan and risk assessments are drawn up for each child, young person and parent and child placement. These documents reflect individual needs and care plans and provide clear guidance to foster carers about how to reduce possible risks and keep children, young people and parents safe from harm.

However, the inspection identified that, on at least one occasion, an assessment report did not contain sufficient detail and evaluation in relation to the impact of an identified, possible structural hazard on the suitability of the premises for parent and child placements. No risk assessment had been drawn up to assess the level or risk or to identify measures to reduce the likelihood of risk. This shortfall potentially placed children and parents at risk of possible harm. At the time of the inspection, this particular foster home was not providing a parent and child placement and the service took note of the inspection findings.

The regular supervision of foster carers, the undertaking of two to three unannounced visits per year to fostering households, and the completion of at least an annual health and safety checks contribute to the safeguarding of children, young people and parents in fostering placements.

Recruitment and selection processes are rigorously completed. All necessary vetting checks are undertaken in the recruitment of the service's fostering and administrative staff, panel members and foster carers. These thorough measures help to prevent unsuitable people from having contact with vulnerable children, young people and adults.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The leadership and management of this fostering service are strong. Leaders and managers have high aspirations for the children, young people and parents placed within this service and they strive for continual improvement in all aspects of the service's operation. Satisfactory action has been taken to tackle the requirement and recommendations made at the previous inspection of the service.

Developments within the service support improvements in care practices, increase staff and carers' knowledge and skill sets and provide children and young people with new opportunities that support their personal development. For example, the staff and foster carers learning and development programme recently put in place, and the development of children and young people's participation opportunities.

Frequent monitoring mechanisms at both service and organisation level provide a valuable oversight of the quality of the fostering service provided to children, young people and parents. The rigorous tracking of the progress and outcomes for individual children and young people efficiently monitors their experiences. This enables effective action to be quickly taken, if required, to ensure every individual placed receives the specific help and support they need, to ensure they are kept safe from harm and they make progress in their development. Consequently, the service is influential in positively changing the lives of children and young people in placement and helping parents to make improvements in their lives. This is clearly demonstrated within the exceptional outcomes achieved by many individuals placed within this fostering service.

The service has successfully established extremely effective working relationships with partner agencies and local authorities. Managers have a good understanding of the needs of their local authorities for fostering placements and the service's recruitment strategy aims to provide these specific types of foster placements.

Commissioners speak highly of the strengths of this fostering service, commenting that, 'this is a preferred service provider,' and, 'we appreciate their steady and measured approach to matching, as this results in good placement stability.'
Commissioners commend: the leadership of the Registered Manager; the good

communication between placing authorities and the service; the provision of skilled foster carers; and the good working relationships established by the service with local authority social workers in the effective implementation of care plans.

The Registered Manager post has recently become vacant and the service is currently being led by the Regional manager, who is suitably qualified and experienced to do so. Staff benefit from access to good training opportunities that help them to develop skills and abilities relevant to their roles within the service. Staff morale within the service is high; staff members demonstrate huge enthusiasm and energy in the work they undertake and their commitment to making a positive difference in children, young people and parents' lives is exceptional.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.