

# Pathway Care (Bristol)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Pathway Care (Bristol) Limited is an independent fostering agency that was established in 2003 as a limited company. The Pathway Care Group has been providing foster care to children and young people since 1996 and currently operates as part of a large child care organisation providing fostering, children's homes and educational services across England, Scotland and Wales.

At the time of the inspection, the Bristol fostering service supported 33 approved foster households which offer a range of placements for either individual young people or sibling groups. Placements can be made on a short term, bridging, respite, or longer term basis. The service provides parent and child placements, placements for children and young people with disabilities, and mainstream placements. 35 children and young people were currently in placement .

Pathway care operates a joint panel for the south-west region; it is independently chaired and panel meetings are held monthly.

### 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**.

The fostering agency provides good support to children and young people and helps them to make excellent progress and to achieve positive outcomes in their lives. The

welfare, safety and consideration of the child's or young person's experience are central in all aspects of the agency operation. Good quality direct work with children, young people and foster carers is provided by the agency social workers, family outreach workers and therapists. This results in exceptional progress being made by some children and young people, based on their starting points.

Although matching processes are generally strong, care needs to be taken to ensure that the agency only place children and young people whose individual needs foster carers are always likely to be able to effectively meet, and which will not result in placement breakdown. This means that children and young people will benefit from living in stable placements.

Children and young people say that they feel secure and this helps them to develop safe and trusting relationships with others. They say they are happy in their placements and feel very much a part of their fostering family. Foster carers are part of the professional team working with the child and they feel valued within this fostering agency. Well established recruitment, assessment, preparation and the regular supervision of each foster carer results in this agency being able to provide a range of skilled carers to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people placed. The foster carers' good knowledge base and their outstanding understanding of the children and young people they look after constructively informs planning and decision-making to benefit children and young people.

The agency demonstrates sound safeguarding practice and there are effective external working arrangements established with local professionals and safeguarding agencies which robustly protect children and young people placed with the agency. Staff and foster carers receive good quality and regular supervision, training and developmental opportunities to support them in looking after children and young people well. However, the agency need to develop clearer working protocols with local police to be followed when young people go missing.

The registered persons are suitably qualified and experienced. The roles and accountabilities of the Registered Manager and the responsible individual are clearly defined. Senior leadership and management within the agency demonstrate innovation and a strong drive for improvement in outcomes for children and young people. There are numerous participation opportunities for foster carers and children and young people in terms of service development and recruitment and this increases and enriches the development of care practices.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to

meet the child's assessed needs. Specifically, that the agency reduces the number of unplanned placement endings. (NMS 15.1)

- ensure that they take appropriate action to find children who are missing. Specifically, that they form a protocol with the local police on the action to be taken in the event of children going missing (NMS 5.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency maintains a strong focus on individual children's and young person's experiences and development. The individual care needs of children and young people are well planned by supervising social workers in collaboration with placing authorities to ensure that they receive individualised care, designed to best meet their unique needs. This supports them in their personal, social and educational development. Supervising social workers ensure that children and young people are actively involved in their care planning and their views are taken into account when reviewing their plans and their placements with foster carers. This ensures that they feel listened to and respected. Their feelings of empowerment are increased by having been encouraged to contribute to their care planning.

Children and young people live in comfortable environments that are rich in physical, educational and play resources. All receive generous pocket money allowances and are encouraged to open savings accounts. This helps them to feel secure and confident about the future. They say they feel safe and happy, and enjoy living in their foster homes. One young person said "I have everything I could possibly want here". Each child or young person receives a personal profile of their foster family prior to their placement. This information helps them to know more about what their immediate future holds and to feel more confident about moving into their foster homes. Young people say that they are fully included in family life and this adds to their feelings of safety and security. Giving children and young people a secure base contributes to helping them to learn to trust others and to develop secure primary attachments. Where appropriate, foster carers support young people to maintain contact with their birth families, in accordance with their care plans, and this is crucial when the plan is for children and young people to return to live successfully within their birth families.

Children and young people are supported by carers who have been properly trained and supported by supervising social workers to make sure that children and young people have a better understanding of their personal histories and difficulties and this helps them to move positively forward. Most children and young people are making significant improvements in their personal, social and emotional development as they grow up. They benefit from the individualised, creative support they receive from their foster carers to help them move successfully towards adulthood and independent living. Besides learning practical self-care and independent living skills, young people benefit from enjoying a good balance of personal space and support. This enables them to successfully learn from their

mistakes as they venture into new territories, for example, positively managing increased free time and forming safe relationships.

Carers ensure that children and young people are encouraged take part in community leisure activities, attending groups and are given the opportunity to experience a wide range of stimulating hobbies and interests. Additionally, these experiences are also provided by the agency's young people's forums and group leisure activities. This helps young people to develop social skills, and consequently most are making outstanding progress in this area, given their starting points.

Carers promote children and young people's health by ensuring that routine medical, optician and dental checks are carried out. Carers know how to access the services of the looked after children's nurses to support young people who may have a history of drug or alcohol misuse, or who may need advice about sexual health. Supervising social workers will liaise with placing authorities if they feel that children or young people need to be referred to child and adolescent mental health services. Additionally, the agency employs the services of a psychotherapist who will work alongside the family outreach workers to undertake direct work with children and young people. The provision of this range of services helps to ensure that children's health is properly monitored and gives them the best chance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Young people are making exceptional progress with their education. All young people are in full time education and the agency has systems in place which ensure that there are personal education and pathway plans in place. Carers know how to make good use of the available grant funds to further support children and young people's education. Additionally, family outreach workers will also give young people additional educational support and will liaise with virtual head teachers to ensure that looked after children are fully supported educationally. Supporting young people to achieve educational progress helps to raise young peoples' self-esteem and supports them in developing high aspirations for their futures.

## **Quality of service**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency provides positive experiences for children and young people and the overwhelming majority of them make good progress in their social, educational and health development. There are effective systems in place to monitor children and young people's progress in these areas. The agency provides a range of diverse services for children and young people, including offering placements to children and young people with more complex needs and challenging behaviour. Although feedback gathered from commissioners and social workers about the quality of care provided is generally extremely positive and the agency have worked hard to maintain placements when difficulties arise, there is still a frequency of placement breakdowns that is higher than the national average and this means that children and young people may not have been matched with carers who have the specialist skills to meet their overall needs. However, there has been a sustained improvement

in placement stability since a new management structure has been in place.

Foster carers say they receive outstanding support from supervising social workers and family outreach workers. They commend the out of office hours service when crisis arise. One carer said "There is always somebody there when you need them." Accessible support helps carers to effectively meet children and young peoples' diverse needs and helps to keep them safe from harm.

The agency provides 12 week parent and child assessments and commissioning and social work officers from placing authorities comment on the high quality of this service. The agency also provides placements for a number of children with disabilities. The carers providing this service have the appropriate background and experience and have received ongoing training to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of the children placed.

Foster carers demonstrate a thorough understanding of their foster child's care plans and their delegated authority. They show confidence and competence in carrying out their caring accountabilities. This results in the children and young people they look after not being disadvantaged and being treated similarly to their peers living within their birth families. Foster carers know how to communicate with the children and young people they look after and they are very good at making them feel part of the fostering household. The agency also provides respite placements for children and young people when it is in the individual's best interests. Often these placements are with carers who live locally and are already known to the child or young person. This results in a minimum level of disruption to the lives of children and young people.

Foster carers are recruited to provide a diverse range of placements to meet the identified needs of looked after children and young people in this area. The preparation, assessment, support and training of foster carers is comprehensive and robust, with a clear focus on meeting the needs of children and young people placed. These processes provide foster carers with a realistic understanding of their role, and those of the local authority and the fostering agency.

The fostering panel consists of suitably qualified and experienced persons. The panel accesses the services of people with medical and legal expertise. The panel effectively carries out its quality assurance functions, including robust challenge to the agency, and clearly delivers its sound recommendations. The panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements and there is effective communication between the panel and the fostering agency. Foster carers' feedback about their assessment and attendance at panel is sought to improve agency processes. The function of the panel chair and members is effectively assessed to further raise the quality of care provided within the agency to children and young people and to protect them.

The agency is vigilant in obtaining key information pertaining to each child or young person prior to placement, to enable foster carers to fulfil their roles effectively and provide exemplary care that meets children and young peoples' needs. The agency has a robust system in place to chase up outstanding documents to ensure foster carers have prompt access to relevant facts.

Children and young peoples' health and wellbeing is well promoted and monitored by the agency and their physical and emotional health needs are well met. Children and young peoples' emotional wellbeing benefits from the therapeutic approach of the agency and the availability of therapy in line with the implementation of their individual care plans.

The agency's commitment to the educational support of children and young people is robust and ongoing. Agency staff have active involvement in Personal Education Plans and Pathway plans and reviews of the same. Foster carers know about available funding packages in place to support looked after children's education and they are rigorous in ensuring this is accessed to support their foster child's developmental needs.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has a range of sound safeguarding policies and clearly written foster carers' guidance which is intended to ensure that children and young people are kept safe. These policies and procedures are effectively and routinely reviewed. The agency's safeguarding policies take account of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care policies, protocols and procedures that are in place across the authorities that the agency covers. There are also clear risk assessments in place for individual young people. The numbers of children and young people going missing from this agency is low compared to the national average. However, the agency does not have clearly written protocols in place which guide staff on the actions to be taken in collaboration with local police officers, and this may mean that immediate effective action may not be put in place when children and young people go missing.

The agency works collaboratively with placing authorities and local safeguarding agencies to protect and promote children and young peoples' safety and welfare. Appropriate safeguarding measures have been taken to protect children and young people in response to identified concerns. Notifications of significant events have been made to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector and this strengthens the external oversight of the agency's safeguarding of children and young people.

Sound area management support and supervision of agency social workers, alongside the diligent implementation of care plans, helps to minimise any likely risk of harm to children and young people. The agency's qualified social workers demonstrate a good understanding of safeguarding practice and they provide good advice and support to foster carers during their regular supervisory visits. Foster carers recognise the impact of abuse and neglect on children and young people and understand their role in securing young people's safety and protection. They appreciate that children and young people should be encouraged and supported to take age-appropriate risks as part of their development into adulthood.

Safe care policies are drawn up for each placement to identify and minimise likely risks to children and young people. Most safe caring policies have been reviewed on at least an annual basis, while others meet best practice standards and have been reviewed and amended in response to arising changes. Annual health and safety checks and annual reviews are undertaken and these activities further protect children and young people. Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least twice a year; this further protects the safety and welfare of children and young people placed.

Recruitment and selection procedures meet safer recruitment guidance standards.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Although they are fairly recent holders of their positions, the registered persons are suitably qualified and experienced and demonstrate a strong focus on the outcomes, progress and experiences of children and young people placed with the agency. In spite of having large spans of responsibility, the Registered Manager and the responsible individual work collaboratively to ensure that the views of children and young people, foster carers, placing authorities and all stakeholders are represented in the consideration of service development and strategy formation. Some input errors within the previous year's database have resulted in inaccurate data reports being sent to the regulatory body. However, there is a new management structure in place which successfully remedied this during the course of the inspection and the inaccurate and confused entries have been identified and addressed.

The agency has reviewed and amended the children's guide and young people's guide to provide child-friendly documents that contain clear information. Although somewhat corporate in format, the agency's statement of purpose has also been updated within the last year. Regular review of these documents ensures that all stakeholders have up to date information about the service.

Staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified, experienced and supervised. Staffing ratios are good; the agency is well resourced and is financially viable. Staff benefit from good training opportunities and are developing their skills which enable them to effectively supervise foster carers. Staff receive regular supervision and an annual appraisal of their performance. This contributes to raising performance and the quality of care provided to children and young people.

The agency demonstrates an outstanding commitment for continuous improvement to benefit the outcomes and progress of children and young people. The progress and outcomes for children and young people in placement are closely monitored to ensure their needs are being met and they are making good progress. Participation opportunities for foster carers and children and young people are well established within the agency and their involvement further enriches the quality of care provided to children and young people. Children and young people are included in the interviews of staff, carers and panel members and receive financial reward for doing

so. The agency has established a clear understanding with contracting local authorities and works collaboratively with social workers and other professionals.

Leaders and senior managers within the organisation are present and visible within the local office and provide staff with the support which makes a positive difference to the lives of the children and young people placed with the agency.

## 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.