

Pathway Care (Midlands) Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

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| 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, established in 1996 as a limited company. The company operates a number of regional offices across England and Wales, providing care for over 530 children and young people. The Cardiff office retains senior management, finance and human resources functions. Pathway Care (Midlands) Ltd, hereafter Pathway Care, was first registered in February 2004 and is based in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. Pathway Care's Statement of Purpose establishes that it specialises in the placement of difficult to place children, sibling groups, mother and baby assessments, planned and emergency placements, assessment, short term, bridging and long term placements. It undertakes recruitment, assessment, support and training of foster carers. At the time of the inspection Pathway Care supported 68 foster families with 87 children and young people in placement.

Summary

This is a full, key inspection which was announced. It focuses on the 18 key standards relevant to this agency. These include national minimum standards relating to health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. They do not include standards in relation to achieving economic well-being. The inspection includes National Minimum Standard four, relating to monitoring and controlling. Although not a key standard, much of the developments identified in this inspection hinge on the continuing improvements in this area of practice.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Pathway Care has implemented the two statutory requirements required by the last inspection. The agency was required to put foster placement agreements in place for all respite placements. This has been achieved. To comply with the second requirement the agency now maintains fully compliant records of placements with foster carers. Pathway Care has also addressed the recommendations made by the previous inspection. Evidence of matching, safe care plans and risk assessments are in place for respite placements. Safe care plans are reviewed to meet the needs of each individual placement. They are reviewed through the course of the placement to ensure they continue to meet changing needs. Risk assessments are completed in greater detail where there is identified risk. Staff have been trained in the use of risk assessment. Foster carers now record all medication given to children and young people. The agency and the foster carers are currently developing a new model for recording administration of medication to be introduced in the near future. The agency has introduced a new process for recording and monitoring educational achievements. The fostering panel now includes a member with expertise in child health. Pathway Care has introduced a number of improvements in addition to those required or recommended by the previous inspection. The agency has continued to develop the ways in which it listens to children, foster carers and others. This is contributing directly to changes in the agency. The agency is making excellent progress in aligning quality assurance and review systems to the Every Child Matters framework. Improvements in health management have been assisted by the introduction of the new foster carers' handbook, an updated smoking policy, the introduction of carer-held health records and the introduction of training in autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Improvements in keeping children safe have been

achieved through the review of child protection policies, the updated foster carers' handbook and the improvement of insurance cover for transport of children with special needs. The agency has effected improvements in helping children and young people enjoy and achieve through increasing the range of activities and group work offered by family outreach workers, providing individual support to children on fixed exclusions from school and recognising all achievement.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Pathway Care's outstanding practice promotes improved outcomes for children and young people's health and the development of healthy lifestyles for the future. The agency ensures that sufficient information is gathered in relation to health prior to placement. This forms a sound basis for identifying the support children will need in relation to health and the most appropriate foster carer to meet the need. Children are registered with general practitioners and other appropriate health professionals without delay. The agency trains foster carers in a wide range of areas relating to health including health and hygiene, first aid, autism, promoting resilience in children and child development. It provides guidance on health related matters through the new foster carers' handbook. Foster carers are aware of their role as the advocate of the child in accessing health provision and are effective in undertaking it. Foster carers advocate to gain access to primary and hospital health resources in spite of resistance from the health professionals involved. Children and young people are benefiting from this earlier intervention. Pathway Care supports foster carers in their work with children on health. Through supervision they regularly ask foster carers to reflect on developments and work which needs to be undertaken. The agency employs a psychotherapist with specific expertise in attachment theory to support foster carers who are looking after children with attachment disorders. This support is often frequent and lengthy. It helps foster carers to maintain placements for children with deep emotional trauma which would otherwise break down. Foster carers seek to establish healthy lifestyles for children and young people through diet and involvement in sport and leisure. They regard it as an area in which they can have a lasting impact on life outcomes of children placed. Foster carers now maintain a health record for each individual child which allows comprehensive and consistent recording of all information relating to health. They are confident about arrangements for consent to medical treatment. During the inspection examples were seen of children who had made outstanding progress in social, linguistic, physical health and developmental goals since coming into placement. Through the development of quality assurance and review tools based on the Every Child Matters outcomes, the agency is able to monitor and evaluate the progress of children and young people's health. Foster carers and the agency contribute health information to the local authority. This helps promote informed decision making and consistency in practice with children and young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Good practice and procedures at Pathway Care help to keep children and young people safe. The agency operates sound practices in relation to recruitment and staff vetting which ensure that all who work for the agency are suitable to do so and have the necessary qualifications and skills to undertake their roles. Comprehensive staff files are well-maintained to demonstrate the vetting, application and interview processes which candidates undertake. Records demonstrate that staff are subject to induction, probation and appraisal to ensure continued suitability to work with children in a fostering setting. Pathway Care has recruited a social work

team with a wide range of skills and a good knowledge of child development. The agency ensures that foster homes are suitable for the children and young people placed in them. It achieves this through regular health and safety checks, unannounced visits, relevant training for foster carers and provision of safety packs for homes. The agency acknowledged that one foster carer did not have medication in a locked cabinet. This could place a child or young person at risk. It was, however, the exception to the rule. The agency requires children to have their own bedrooms except in the case of siblings, and then, only where it is demonstrated that it is in their best interests. Homes visited during the inspection were warm, welcoming and child-friendly. Children and young people placed have been able to personalise their environment and demonstrated ownership of it. The children and young people visited are very proud of their rooms and their precious belongings in them. In this way the agency enables children and young people to feel safe in their homes, increasing the likelihood of placement stability. They are protected from the risk of harm in the home, its surroundings and in foster carers' vehicles. During the past year there have been very few unplanned disruptions to placements within Pathway Care. This represents a high degree of stability for children placed with the agency. This is largely achieved through good quality matching of foster carers' skills and profiles to the needs of children seeking placement. Foster carers are involved in placement decisions. They express a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of matching achieved. The agency seeks full information on children who are referred for placement enabling them to identify the foster carer who can best meet identified needs. They consult children and young people already in the foster home about the decision to place another child. In most cases children and young people have a period of introduction before moving into the foster home. Foster placement agreements are now routinely in place for all placements, including respite provision. This allows for consistent and accountable practice in relation to the demands of each individual placement. The matching process also involves risk assessment in relation to known risks to, or from, the child or young person under consideration. This allows the agency to manage risk by identifying support that will be needed and necessary protective measures at the outset of the placement. At present the matching documents and risk assessment forms do not adequately reflect the work which is being undertaken to ensure that children and young people are placed with the right foster carers for them. In one case the matching paperwork was not in place relating to a placement of a young person although the match to their current foster carers was well-founded and successful. The agency is currently introducing new matching and risk assessment forms which better reflect practice. The agency is introducing foster carer profiles. This has resulted from consultation with children and young people. They feel that arrival at a foster home where there has been no opportunity for introductions would be eased by being able to read or look at a profile which tells them about the family they have come to live with. The limited use of exemptions and consultation with children and young people who are already living in the home increases the sense of security felt by children and young people in placement. Children and young people's welfare is safeguarded through the child protection procedures operated by the agency. These have been reviewed since the last inspection. Foster carers and staff demonstrate understanding of the procedures. They are supported in this by clear guidance within the agency's documents, training in child protection and supervision. Each fostering household has in place a safe care policy. This is comprehensive and is amended to reflect the specific needs of each individual placement. The agency reviews it regularly to ensure it continues to meet the needs of children placed within the foster home. Foster carers demonstrate understanding of the rationale for safe care policies and commitment to operating within them. All foster carers attend training in safer caring. The agency operates a joint fostering panel with Pathway Care's separately registered Bristol office. It subjects the panel members to the

same vetting procedures as other staff within the agency. The panel membership now includes a member with expertise on child health. The panel offers a good blend of expertise, knowledge, experience and background. The panel operates effectively in quality assuring the assessments and reviews which come before it for recommendation. Through the collective responsibility of members to identify issues, feedback forms on assessments and the use of the panel adviser as a conduit between panel and the agency, the panel contributes to ensuring foster carers who are approved are suitable for the task which they are to undertake. The panel is led by an effective and knowledgeable chair and is rigorous in testing assessments of prospective foster carers and reviews of current foster carers. In line with practice in its other panels Pathway Care plans to introduce management information to panel on foster carer annual reviews which have not been presented specifically to it. Pathway Care offers effective protection to children and young people. It achieves this through vetting of staff, foster carers and panel members, ensuring assessments of foster carers are rigorously tested, ensuring foster homes are safe and secure, ensuring children and young people are well-matched to their foster carers and setting high expectations in child protection. Generally procedures and policies support this activity effectively.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Pathway Care is contributing to increased self-esteem in children and young people placed which promotes their opportunity to enjoy and achieve. The agency seeks to match children and young people to foster carers who can meet the specific needs of their culture or ethnicity. Where it is not possible to find a perfect match provision is put in place to support foster carers in meeting the needs of the children and young people. In transracial placements children and young people have been placed with foster carers who have direct experience of dual heritage family life and whose extended family offers the opportunity for positive role models. The assessment process tests prospective foster carers' willingness to actively contribute to the development of the identity of those placed with them. The agency has increased the number of black and Asian carers it supports and is actively seeking further applicants from the Asian community to increase opportunities to make good matches for children and young people. The agency has driven forward recruitment of male foster carers through its innovative media campaign 'Tough Enough to Care'. It seeks to support them in their role through dedicated support groups and training. A number of foster carers have particular skills in relation to supporting children and young people with disability. The agency supports individualised training for foster carers to meet the needs of children and young people. This has included training in autism and in interventions with severely disabled children. Some of this training is accessed through local health resources. A positive attitude to diversity supported by skills, training and positive recruitment promotes the self-esteem of children and young people placed with Pathway Care. Children and young people placed with the agency have achieved good outcomes in education. At the point of referral the agency establishes the education requirements of the young person or child so that they can be matched to a foster carer who can meet those needs. Pathway Care establishes a clear expectation on its foster carers to support the education of children and young people placed with them. Homes provide adequate space for study. Foster carers communicate with schools through regular contact and parents' evenings. While many foster carers discuss the shortfalls of their own education in their assessments, they are demonstrably determined to ensure a better education for their foster children. At present the agency does not provide specific guidance to foster carers on education within the contemporary framework to ensure that they are aware of key stages in the child's

education and the national curriculum for different age groups. The Registered Manager acknowledges that this is an area for development. Children and young people placed by Pathway Care are able to improve their educational outcomes through the support of their foster carers. They, in turn, are supported by supervision sessions which always focus on education issues. Where children are out of school the agency allocates a family outreach worker to work alongside the child or young person and their carer to ensure that they are engaged constructively during the school day. There have been no permanent exclusions of children and young people placed with Pathway Care since the last inspection. The work of the foster carers and the agency in promoting the importance of education is allowing children and young people to develop stability in educational placements. This is a significant contribution to long term outcomes in education for looked after children. Pathway Care celebrates all educational achievements of children and young people through its regular newsletter for stakeholders. It has introduced a more comprehensive education monitoring system to help achieve increasingly better outcomes for children and young people. As with all its evaluation, the agency is moving it into the Every Child Matters framework.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Pathway Care excels in assisting children, young people and other stakeholders to influence their day to day lives. The agency establishes clear arrangements for contact at the referral stage. This enables it to identify foster carers who can physically, emotionally and geographically satisfy the demands of maintaining the contact. The arrangements for contact are clearly recorded and contained within the foster placement agreement. Foster carers describe how some contact arrangements are hugely stressful for children and carers alike. However, in preparation for fostering training the agency makes them aware of the importance of contact and their role in supporting children and young people to maintain links with family and friends. Supervising social workers use supervision sessions to support the foster carers in this role. Where there are particularly onerous contact arrangements in place the agency will provide a family outreach worker to reduce the burden on the foster carers. Foster carers record information relating to contact and its impact on the children and young people appropriately. The agency shares this information with the local authority through monthly reports. It contributes to the children and young people's reviews. Examples were seen of foster carers going beyond what is asked of them to ensure that contact for children, young people and their families is valued. This has included arranging contact with the wider family group, which one local authority does not have the resources to arrange or support. It has also included constructive communication with birth parents through the use of contact books. Foster carers listen to the views of children and young people about contact while acknowledging that it is difficult for a younger child to influence the arrangements imposed by the court or local authority. Foster carers seek to speak positively about contact even where they were unconvinced of its merits. Pathway Care actively seeks the views of foster carers, local authority social workers, children and young people placed and birth children of foster carers. Foster carer and foster children consultation groups are in place and are influencing practice. Through them children and young people have influenced the design and presentation of the new Children's Guide, the process for introducing a child to a new foster home and the range of activity days on offer during school holidays. The agency holds groups for children and young people, for men who foster and regular foster carer support meetings. The agency is developing other groups, including one for the birth children of foster carers and another for girls who are fostered. The views of foster and birth children are sought for the foster carers' reviews. Children

and young people spoken to and surveyed indicated unanimously that their opinions and views are listened to and acted upon. The agency's complaints procedure operates in accordance with procedures and offers timely and considered responses to complaints. The agency monitors the nature and outcome of the complaints on a regular basis. The policies, procedures and practices of Pathway Care ensure that children and young people are able to maintain their primary relationships while in foster care. They also allow them a voice in their care. Likewise the agency encourages foster carers to positively contribute to the practice of the agency.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Pathway Care has sound practices in relation to management and organisation. Staff and foster carers understand the aims and objectives of the agency through the Statement of Purpose, the foster carers' handbook, policies, guidance, supervision and training. They understand their roles in achieving those aims and objectives. Children and young people are able to understand the role of the agency through a good quality children's guide. There are clear management structures within the organisation. Staff are able to illustrate how these structures operate. Each member of staff is supported by supervision from a suitably qualified and senior person. Supervision is regular and challenging. It is complemented by the dialogue within the social work team which allows staff to use their different areas of expertise to increase the effectiveness of the entire team. There are adequate numbers of suitably qualified staff to ensure that foster carers are supported day and night and are, in turn, able to support the children and young people placed with them. Foster carers understand the range of support available to them and use it effectively and appropriately. The quality of administrative back up in the agency is of a high standard. The agency maintains the required records with the exception of the child or young person's address on leaving placement in the children's register. Pathway Care have invested in the development of a new database to reflect the demand of regulations and the Every Child Matters framework. This system is due to go live in the near future. The agency believes it will afford the opportunity to maintain better records and information critical to their quality assurance functions. The current records are well-managed, audited, comprehensive and easy to navigate. Records maintained by foster carers are of a good standard. Record keeping forms a compulsory element of the foster carers' training. Foster carers are happy to share records with the children and young people. Examples were seen of foster carers maintaining memorabilia for children and of the pride the children took in this. The agency performs exceptionally well in quality assurance. The discipline is well established in the wider organisation and a team includes regional quality assurance managers. The quality assurance manager responsible for the Midlands region is able to draw local information and developments into the national discussions. This aids consistency in practice and allows good, effective practice in one region to influence that of another. Social work staff have become increasingly aware of the importance of auditing, monitoring and evaluation. Pathway Care seeks to promote this work as a tool for improving social work effectiveness. Staff and foster carers' training needs are regularly assessed through review, appraisal and supervision. Pathway Care plans and delivers training on a wide range of topics. The agency seeks to recruit a range of foster carers from different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures. All but one of the assessments seen during the inspection were of a good standard and sought to test the required qualities, competences and aptitudes of the prospective foster carers. The quality assurance

manager, in their role as panel manager, seeks to ensure that assessments coming before panel are complete and sufficiently comprehensive. The one inadequate assessment is the first to be completed for this agency by an experienced, independent assessor. The Registered Manager acknowledges that more rigorous supervision of independent assessors new to the agency could prevent such shortfalls. A rigorous fostering panel addressed many of the shortfalls. The quality of foster carers' annual reviews is good and consistent. These are completed by the quality assurance manager and address the Every Child Matters outcomes in assessing the progress of the foster carer. Pathway Care ensures that the management and organisation of the agency supports the fostering task. Staff and foster carers are aware that the maintenance of good records forms a safe and complete record for children and young people of their time in the looked after system. They also understand that good information assists good, informed decision making about the children and young people while they are looked after. The effectiveness of staff management ensures foster carers receive the levels of support promised. This, in turn, allows the foster carers to provide the levels of support needed by foster children and young people. In July 2007 Pathway Care took on 28 fostering families following the closure of the independent fostering agency for which they worked. Many of these foster carers came with children in placement. They also took on three staff from the agency. The assessment, registering and supervision of this large influx of foster carers places considerable demands on the agency. Pathway Care have ensured that they have adequate staff to undertake this work, that the fostering panel is able to address large additional volumes of work and that this process has been managed closely with Ofsted to ensure regulations are not compromised. The work undertaken was examined during the inspection and provides evidence that Pathway Care are ensuring that each transferred foster carer is subjected to the same level of scrutiny and assessment to be expected of any applicant.

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 |
|----------|--|------------------|
| 24 | maintain and keep up to date the records specified in Schedule 2 with particular reference to ensuring that information in the children's register detailing the child's address on leaving placement is maintained (Regulation 22). | 30 November 2007 |

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster homes are free of avoidable hazards in relation to the storage of medication (National Minimum Standard 6.6)
- ensure that all assessments of foster carers assess the qualities, competences and aptitudes for fostering outlined in National Minimum Standard 17 (National Minimum Standard 17.7).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

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

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

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)

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

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)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

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)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

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)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

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)

Annex A

- 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)

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