

The Fostering Foundation

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	5 West Street, TAVISTOCK, Devon, PL19 8AD
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Telephone number	01822618068
Email	info@fosteringfoundationsw.co.uk
Registered person	The Fostering Foundation (South West) Limited
Registered manager	Jennifer Victoria Jones
Responsible individual	Geoffrey Bowen Lewis
Date of last inspection	31/05/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

The Fostering Foundation (South West) is an independent fostering agency providing the following range of foster care services: planned long-term or permanent care; bridging to adoption; emergency placements; parent and child placements and supported lodgings for older young people; task centred- limited placement; specialist schemes; respite care

The service is part of The Fostering Foundation, which has regional branches in Bristol and London. This branch of the service is based in Tavistock and provides carers in Devon, Somerset and Cornwall. The agency has 44 registered carers and is currently looking after 36 children and young people.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **adequate**.

The main strengths of this service are the clear leadership, direction and commitment provided by the manager, staff and carers. The service is well monitored and managers have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service. There are realistic plans in place to continue to develop and improve the quality of the service provided.

This branch benefits from being relatively small. As a result, relationships between children, carers, staff and managers are close. This is something that the staff and the manager are keen to promote. This enables good matching of children and as a result, there are very few unplanned placement endings. The agency is able to meet the needs of children in a highly individualised manner. Outcomes for children are good.

Carers are well supported and supervised and value the training they receive. Much of the service is very good and most children make significant progress in this service.

However, in a small number of cases not all information is made available to carers in a timely manner. In one case, carers who exceeded the fostering numbers limit did not have an appropriate exemption in place. Other areas for further improvement include staff recruitment and the role of agency decision maker. These breaches of the regulations do not have a significant impact on the safety or welfare of children. Feedback from placing social workers, independent reviewing officers and other professionals is very positive.

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
20 (2011)	ensure that no person starts working for the agency until full and satisfactory checks are completed in accordance with Schedule 1 (Regulations 5, 7 and 20)	01/10/2012
27 (2011)	ensure that the usual fostering limit is not exceeded unless an appropriate exemption is in place. (Children Act 1989, Schedule 7)	01/10/2012

Recommendations

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

- ensure that foster carers are given a copy of the child's placement plan (NMS 31.2)
- ensure that any reviews of the placement are requested if they are overdue (NMS 31.6)
- ensure that all entries in the records are signed and dated (NMS 26.5)
- ensure that the fostering service decision maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. (NMS 23.12)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children benefit from being encouraged and supported to participate in planning and decision-making for their future lives. They are also able to contribute to their day-

to-day decision making in their foster placements. The organisation consults young people about the quality of the service through comments at foster carers' annual reviews, placement reviews and in consultation exercises. Young people confirm that they are consulted about the quality of the service and how they would like it to improve. Children and young people have participated in the development of the foster care charter and young people's handbooks.

Young people say that they are happy in their foster placements. They are usually given sufficient information about carers and some are able to visit prior to being placed within a family. All young people spoken with say that are treated as any other member of the household.

Significant progress is being made by a number of children and young people who have complex emotional needs. Foster carers are fully aware and proactive in promoting good health outcomes for children. All children are able to receive a wide range of health services that can meet their physical, emotional and psychological needs. The agency has strong links with a wide range of health professionals. Feedback from young people and other professionals is very positive.

Some young people are making exceptional progress in their educational attendance and attainment as a result of an innovative project aimed at promoting educational outcomes. Children's educational attainment and school attendance are uppermost in foster carer and staff practice. Carers, supervising social workers, support workers and the manager all advocate on behalf of children's education. They liaise closely with schools, colleges and educational professionals. Feedback from educational staff says that the commitment towards promoting good educational outcomes for children goes well above and beyond the norm. As a result, many children are able to make up for any educational deficit, a view strongly supported by the local authority's virtual school head teacher.

Children are supported in developing a wide range of leisure and social activities within the home and to encourage community contact. The organisation also organises a number of group activities throughout the year for children, carers and their families. Most young people say that they now have a greater understanding of their personal circumstances and have gained in self-confidence. As a result, children now have a more positive view of themselves.

Foster carers promote young people's developing independence in an age-appropriate manner. Younger children are supported in decision making and taking some personal responsibility. Older young people are encouraged to develop higher levels of responsibility and decision making; for example, in areas such as health care, education, finance and relationships.

Children benefit from stable placements and there are very few unplanned placement endings. All placements that end in an unplanned manner have disruption meetings, in order to learn from those events and further reduce unplanned placement endings.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

Children benefit from being placed with carers who are highly committed to meeting their needs and are passionate about promoting positive outcomes for children and young people. Training, supervision and development of carers provides them with the skills to meet the needs of young people. For example, there are highly individualised programmes for promoting educational achievement.

The service recruits a wide range of carers with diverse skills. Foster carers are very aware of the importance of supporting and promoting the individual differences of all young people. Matching is well considered when making placements. Most carers say they always receive all the information about children that is held by the agency, including information about emotional and physical needs. However, not all children have placement plans and some carers report that placing local authorities are slow in producing information. Requests made by the agency for the relevant information have been unsuccessful. As a result, in a small number of cases some children have been looked after by carers who have very little information about the needs of children and how those are to be met. Foster carers do say that they are valued by the agency and that they are treated as full members of the professional team looking after children.

A strength of the service is its relatively small size. As a result, all staff have a good knowledge of foster carers' skills, which assists good matching of children to families. Foster carers particularly value the support and consultation that takes place with all members of their household. Foster carers are committed to raising practice standards. Foster carers and other professionals are very positive about the quality of the service.

The agency monitors placement progress and outcomes to inform the training and development needs of carers and staff. This is also used in future recruitment programmes, ensuring that the agency has sufficient carers with the right skills to meet the needs of children.

The agency's foster care approval panel is generally effective, well chaired and rigorous in making recommendations. The agency decision maker is independent, but is not a senior staff member within the organisation. However, currently there is one foster carer who has placements which take them over the usual fostering limit. No exemption is in place.

Some other foster carers received no pre-placement information. In some instances, there is no placement plan and no looked after child (LAC) review has taken place. This results in some carers having limited formal written guidance to direct them in how to provide positive, safe care for each child and to clarify the objectives of the placement. In some cases, the success or otherwise of the placement is not formally measured, due to the absence of LAC reviews. Attempts have been made to gather this information. However, to date this has been unsuccessful.

Additional and specialist medical educational and psychological support is available to children and carers as is required to meet their needs. All carers have completed or are in the process of completing the Children's Workforce Development Council training standards.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **adequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people say that they feel safe in their foster homes and that they believe their foster carers work hard to promote their well-being. Foster carers are very clear about their responsibility for promoting the safety of children. All foster carers spoken with say that they are confident that the training and guidance they receive from the agency has equipped them to respond appropriately to any concerns about children's safety. All young people have individual risk assessments. Foster carers are usually provided with information about the risk presented to and by young people they are asked to look after. Foster carers are aware of how any allegations against them will be managed and what type of support will be offered to them should this arise.

Young people and carers are clear about how to raise any concerns they may have about the service and say that they believe their concerns would be taken seriously and fairly looked into. To date, the agency has received no complaints. The service promotes children's safety when they are missing from home. Foster carers and staff are aware of protocols that exist between the agency, the police and placing local authorities. As a result, liaison between each of the agencies is good and the numbers of children who are missing from home are small. The service reviews each case when this occurs in order to learn from the experience and reduce future instances.

The agency liaises closely with placing social workers, local authority designated officers and other agencies in order to promote the safety of children. Appropriate referrals are made of any significant concerns affecting the safety of children.

Staff recruitment and selection processes are in place. However, some staff start working before all the required information has been received by the agency; for example, some references were received after the start date and qualification certificates were not all on file.

Unannounced visits take place annually and all carers have regular health and safety checks. Risks assessments are regularly reviewed and updated.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **adequate**.

The manager provides good leadership and direction to carers and staff and is very accessible to staff, carers and young people. This encourages an open environment in which issues can be explored and resolved to the benefit of children and young people.

Managers and staff demonstrate a clear commitment to reviewing the quality of the service and improving outcomes for children. The quality of service is monitored regularly and reviewed each quarter. This ensures that improvement plans can be developed in order to improve outcomes for children. Copies of reviews of the quality of care are sent to Ofsted, demonstrating the ability of managers to monitor, review and devise strategies to improve the service provided. However monitoring systems had failed to identify or rectify shortfalls identified during this inspection. For example, the placing of children over the numbers permitted without an exemption, shortfalls in recruitment and selection processes, the absence of placement planning information and the fact that LAC reviews have not all taken place in a timely manner.

Children's development in each placement is regularly monitored by the manager and the director of social care. This is the first inspection of this service since the registration visit in May 2009. There were no recommendations or requirements to be monitored in this inspection. Despite the shortfalls, there is a clear commitment to continuous improvement and the promotion of good quality care. This is strengthened by foster carers being valued as equal professionals within the team looking after children. They are positive about the quality of the supervision and support they receive, which enables them to be proactive in promoting and achieving good outcomes for children.

A tracking system is in place, which evaluates the progress made by each child; however, this has not been in place for sufficient time to provide clear data identifying progress between one point in time and the next. The intention of this tracking tool is to ensure that outcomes for children continue to improve. This demonstrates a commitment by the agency to drive up standards.

Children and their carers were consulted and involved in the development and publication of a charter for foster carers. They consider that the organisation is open and meets the mutually agreed commitments within the charter.

Children's individual needs are able to be met as a result of good partnership working arrangements. Specialist health, education and psychological workers are available to provide guidance and advice to carers or undertake direct work with children. An example of this is the progress that has been by some children through the use of specialist education workers. The agency is proactive in developing these resources. However, the omission of some information relating to the care needs of some children and the absence of LAC review in a small number of cases, indicates that effective relations to support positive placements, with some Local Authorities are not sufficiently well developed.

All staff are appropriately experienced and qualified to undertake their role. They say

that their professional development is promoted by the regular use of supervision and annual appraisal. All staff members have personal development plans in place and receive sufficient training to maintain their professional registration. Regular joint training opportunities are available to staff and carers. Staff are actively encouraged to develop their skills and improve effective working with children. For example, training in play therapy has been made available to staff who provide support to children and foster carers. This is a positive development and helps to maintain placement stability.

Any significant events are reported to the appropriate agencies in a timely manner. Young people receive up to date and accurate information in the Statement of Purpose and young people's guide, helping them to understand what to expect from the service. The agency has good administrative support. File audits are regularly undertaken but despite these checks, not all entries in the records are signed and dated by the person making the entry.

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 and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 independent fostering agencies.