

Family First Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Family First Fostering (FFF) is an independent fostering agency based in East London. The agency offers a wide range of placements, which includes short and long term placements, planned, emergency and respite care. The agency was first approved in November 2012. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 10 fostering households and 8 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 new independent fostering agency, registered in November 2012. There is a Registered Manager in post who provides good leadership and management and also carries out the role of the supervising social worker while the agency recruits an experienced supervising social worker. When the supervising social worker has been appointed this will enhance the work of the agency and give the manager more time and opportunity to develop the agency and participate in research relating to looked after children. The agency is also supported by the responsible individual who has oversight of the work of the agency, and an administrator.

Children and young people, including those with very complex needs, have their needs met and their welfare promoted. Carers build very good relationship with children and young people and show a strong commitment to them. The matching

process is extremely effective and this is instrumental in providing stable and nurturing placements. Placing social workers and commissioners spoke very highly of the agency.

The agency has recruited a diverse group of carers including carers from ethnic minority communities; this is in line with its Statement of Purpose. The agency is equipped to respond effectively to the complex needs of the young people being referred. The fostering panel provides a robust oversight of the assessment and the suitability and safety of carers. Carers said that their assessments were completed in a timely manner and helped them reflect on their own childhoods and how these have influenced them as individuals. Assessments also focus on the potential carer's ability to demonstrate an understanding of resilience and how they can help children develop their own self-view.

Foster carers say that they are made to feel very much a part of the team working with the child or young person. Their views are regularly canvassed and used effectively to help produce effective care plans and risk assessments to ensure that all the identified needs of the child or young person are met.

Equality and diversity are covered in carers' assessments as well as in training. Children are encouraged and supported to develop their interests through attendance at clubs and taking part in activities. They are helped to take age-appropriate risks and develop their ability to keep themselves safe. Risk-taking behaviour is addressed and reduced over time. There are processes to ensure the physical safety of children in foster placements, including health and safety checks and unannounced visits to carers' homes.

There is good leadership and management within this agency. The Registered Manager, staff team and foster carers have clear values and are committed to continuous development of their skills to develop an ethos of providing care in an environment that is compassionate and nurturing. They understand their strengths and weaknesses through very effective quality assurance and monitoring processes. These drive continuous improvements in service provision which results in outstanding outcomes for children and young people who are placed with this agency. Notifications of significant events are sent to the relevant agencies, including Ofsted, without delay. This (ROSEMARY DANCER: Reassures?) reassures Ofsted that appropriate action has been taken in a timely manner.

No actions or recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people make exceptional progress in all aspects of their lives. Children say that they are given information about carers before they move into a placement. This includes photographs of the carers, their homes and the area where the foster carer lives. In addition, when possible, children are able to visit the foster

home before moving in. This helps to make the moving in process less daunting for children and young people which in turns help them settle into their placements.

Children and young people say that they feel safe living within the family. Care planning arrangements are explicit. This, in addition to effective delegation of authority to carers, helps to support foster carers to make day-to-day decisions for the children and young people they care for. This means that children can enjoy experiences similar to most children and young people, such as sleep overs with friends, and this prevents them from standing out or being stigmatised. This in turn supports the development of trusting and secure attachments to their foster carers. Young people comment, 'I like it here it's home to me.'

Children and young people are assisted to try new things and make choices. This has led to the children and young people being noticeably more independent at school. Carers also support children and young people to participate in community groups such as the cadets, going to the gym and participating in youth and community groups. This has helped to build young people's confidence. One young person commented 'I enjoyed the trip so much I want to return there to teach.' The participation by children and young people in such activities widens their social horizons, and provides opportunities to have fun and to develop or be more aware of their own identity. Foster carers fully support contact with families including brothers and sisters. Any issues arising from family contact are handled appropriately by foster carers. This provides opportunities for children and young people to have some knowledge and understanding of their background.

Children and young people are very involved in decisions about their day-to-day lives, their plans and the running of the agency. Children are encouraged to participate in the Children in Care Council of their placing authority. This helps to ensure that their views are taken very seriously and that they feel valued. There is regular customer satisfaction surveys as well as staff feedback from meetings with the young people. Their views have been instrumental in reviewing the young people's handbook and making it more child friendly.

An information leaflet with details of help-lines, websites and children's rights has been produced in consultation with the young people. As the agency grows there are plans to develop the children and young person's group that will serve as another opportunity to provide feedback to the agency.

Children's and young people are provided with the relevant information and support that ensures all young people understand their right to complain if they are unhappy, concerned or bullied. There are opportunities for the supervising social worker to see children and young people alone to ensure that any ideas for change and improvement are identified and addressed. As a result the children feel safe and listened to. This was echoed by the young person's social worker who said there is an 'open culture' in this agency so children, young people, social workers and carers feel free to express their views.

Children and young people live in stable and well matched placements that help to ensure that children can settle and that they can make very significant progress in

the placement. The progress of each child and young person is measured against their goals and is reflected in detailed monthly reports. Where children or young people are not progressing, care plans are reviewed and the agency puts in place additional support to address the areas of concern. This includes therapeutic support and guidance, additional support with education or engaging mentors from youth offending or education agencies. This results in positive outcomes for children and young people that, in many instances, include a decrease in young people going missing and other risk taking behaviour.

Young people's health is promoted. They are visiting their doctor, dentist and optician regularly. This ensures that no health difficulties are going undetected. Young people are also able to access psychological support as agreed in the care planning to address any emotional health difficulties. Young people eat healthily and take exercise and they usually follow the advice of staff so that they live healthy life styles. For example, one young person is being supported to give up smoking.

All young people have their educational needs assessed and an individual programme of education is tailored to their needs. This is used to gain access to mainstream education. Young people aspire to achieve well and express positive attitudes towards the importance of education. Their attendance levels are good. They are making good progress towards integration into mainstream schools. One young person commented, 'I want to go to college.' A social worker said 'he has gone from level one to level two after being in placement for only 3 weeks.' There are strong links with education workers and social workers to provide a robust response to any education problems.

When children are out of education the carers and agency are very involved in trying to resolve this appropriately and quickly, so that disruption to their education is minimized. In addition carers support children in their education by doing additional work with them when necessary. Placing social workers made very positive comments about this, such as, 'The carer has high expectations for them.' Another commented that the agency is very proactive in ensuring that children are having the very best support possible in school and is always willing to advise staff about their educational needs.

All of the children placed with this agency's foster carers are enjoying very stable placements and the agency aims to ensure that young people stay beyond 18 under their semi-independent living programme. This means that young people will complete an independence programme where foster carers help them acquire a range of knowledge and skills that help them to successfully prepare for moving on to independent living.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers said that they found the skills to foster training very valuable. The foster carers said that the training helped to prepare them to become foster carers.

One carer said, 'It helps us to understand how to help the child or young person manage their behaviour and build their self-esteem. This gives them a sense of belonging.' Consequently, foster carers are reliable and consistent and understand the needs of each child or young person in their care. Respite care is only provided when this is assessed as being in the child's best interest in order to stabilise a placement with a foster carer.

Foster carers receive good quality support and supervision. Foster carers praise the quality of support from the supervising social worker and the Registered Manager. One foster carer commented, 'They are very reliable.' The needs of children and young people are the focus within this agency. During the supervision of carers the supervising social worker always looks at the needs of the child or young person and how they are progressing in the placement. The agency has high expectations of its foster carers and only approves carers who demonstrate that they are committed to caring for children and young people and continually develop and update their knowledge and skills.

Carers are very clear about the importance of making children and young people feel part of their families. Children confirmed that they are treated as members of the family. This helps them to feel valued and settled in their placements and allows them opportunities to form strong secure attachments to carers. A social worker said of the carer, 'he is very nurturing' and young people, 'are very settled and happy in this placement.' Foster carer's homes are welcoming and help children and young people to settle and see themselves as becoming part of the family; this means that children and young people are included in decision making as well as being fully involved with the domesticity of home life.

A social worker also spoke very highly about the management of the agency and their efforts to improve the outcomes for children and young people. Partnership working is effective and accountability and responsibilities are understood. Foster carers work professionally with the child's social worker within the agreed delegated authority; this leads to effective day-to-day decision making for the child. Social workers commented very positively about the quality of the care in all cases.

The agency employs external independent assessors to complete assessments. Assessments are of a high standard. The panel chair commented, 'The assessments are of a good quality and there is a strong route to potential foster carers developing their professional practice.' The diversity of the panel is a key strength of the agency. This includes adults who have experienced care and independent members with a diverse range of professional expertise in child care, health and education. As a result, the panel plays an important role in quality assurance and providing objectivity. The panel is kept updated on developments within the agency and there are good opportunities for panel members to access training.

All relevant information about the child or young person is shared with foster carers prior to placing the child. This allows the foster carer to make informed decisions about accepting a placement into their home. The agency ensures that foster carers are well informed about the underlying causes of the behaviours children or young

people can exhibit. Risk assessments and behaviour strategies are formulated to help support and maintain placements. Foster carers describe the agency as being 'reliable' and said it can be 'counted on' in a crisis. Carers said that they have access to staff 'no matter whatever the time of day or night.' Foster carers say that they feel as part of the team working to meet the needs of the children and young people.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency promotes the safety of children and young people in a way that encourages children and young people to take appropriate risks. Risk assessments are carefully completed, and seek to allow young people to take reasonable risks while offering good degrees of protection. Young people are clear that they feel safe living with their foster carers, and also demonstrate this by their relaxed and happy demeanour in the presence of their foster carers. Comprehensive policies and decisive action help to ensure their safety, for example when young people go missing from the placement. Foster carers follow the agency's missing from care procedures. Foster carers are knowledgeable about safeguarding and are highly protective of the children and young people in their care.

One young person commented, 'I am allowed to go out with my friends but I always have to tell my foster carer where I am going and we agree a time for me to return home.' Risk management is well considered and underpinned by clear documentation. This means that there is a clear approach to risk taking while making sure children and young people are protected from harm. Foster carers also ensure that the children and young people have all the relevant information about the area they have moved into; the phone number of the carer and the address of their new home. Children and young people are familiarised with their local shops and parks where they can go out to play.

Children say that they know how to complain and that they can speak to their carers with any concerns or if they are unhappy. There is an open culture in the agency that makes it easy for carers, staff, children or their social workers to raise concerns. Children and young people are also given information on a wide range of help-lines and websites. The potential need for advocates is discussed at planning meetings and statutory reviews and information about these is available in the children's guide to the fostering service.

Complaints are dealt with thoroughly and the Registered Manager ensures that if any element of a complaint is founded improvements are identified and made. A local authority commissioning officer said that the manager responds to any concerns very quickly and are very open to discussions about concerns. This contributes to an environment where people have confidence in raising any concerns; this provides an important safeguard for children. Carers say that the management team very approachable and deal with issues promptly.

Since registration, there have been eleven incidents involving two young people

where young people have gone missing over a ten month period. Foster carers say that the agency has very clear step by step guidance for dealing with children who do not return to their placement. In addition, there is support and there are debriefing strategies. The agency has worked proactively on reducing these events and there have been only two incidents of missing by one young person in the past month. This shows a clear reduction over time and the positive impact the attempts to reduce risk taking behaviour have had. There are strong working relationships with other agencies such as the placing social workers, safeguarding teams and the police to help protect children who engage in risk taking behaviour.

As part of the matching process the agency considers the risks associated with each child or young person. The composition and needs of individual family members are always considered. Foster carers' homes are subject to regular health and safety checks which ensure environments remain safe. Risk assessments, including pet assessments, are also completed. Detailed placement plans provide guidance for foster carers on how the risks associated with each young person's behaviours should be managed. All plans are subject to regular reviews and are updated in response to incidents and changing circumstances. In addition to the monthly supervisory visits, the Registered Manager undertakes unannounced visits to carers at least twice a year. Children are seen without their carers to give them opportunities to speak freely.

The agency has in place an assessment process that ensures that only those individuals who have successfully undergone the rigorous assessment process and relevant safeguarding checks are recruited and trained as foster carers. The selection of staff and the recruitment of panel members are equally robust and focus on individuals who are committed and subscribe to the ethos and philosophy of the agency. There are comprehensive vetting processes to reduce the likelihood of unsuitable individuals gaining access to the children and young people in their care. The performance of foster cares is monitored on an on-going basis by the Registered Manager. Any standards of care issues that are identified are immediately addressed.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is well managed. The Registered Manager has developed very good working relationships with placing authorities. Social workers and commissioning officers say that the agency gives an honest response in helping them to find well matched placements during difficult periods. One Commissioner said that the agency will say they haven't got a match for the referral rather than take the child and try to fit the child with a carer. This is a very positive feature of this agency as the appropriate matching of placements provides stability for children and young people, many of whom have experienced multiple placement breakdowns.

There have been no unplanned endings since the agency has registered. A social worker said, 'the agency is keen to see that children are well matched before they move in'. This helps to ensure good quality placements that can meet children's needs and help them to develop.

Foster carers spoke positively about the support they receive from the agency and confirmed that they are provided with regular formal supervision and opportunities to reflect on their practice. The agency places great emphasis on the development of its foster carers and there is an expectation that all will continually update their knowledge and skills in order to respond appropriately to the changing needs of the children and young people being referred.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are comprehensive and easily understood. This young people's guide is translated into the child or young person's first language. As a result all children, young people, parents, relatives, staff and foster carers are clear about the aims and objectives of the agency. An effective quality assurance system ensures that all aspects of the service contribute to continuing improvement. The agency has in place an annual consultation, review and development plan which is available to stakeholders. The agency holds a central record of all concerns and complaints which informs improvements in the care provided to children and young people.

The agency's aim is to recruit a diverse group of foster carers that will enable the agency to fulfil their commitments to local authorities as well as their Statement of Purpose. There are good monitoring systems in place to ensure that any difficulties arising within a placement are identified early and additional support is provided. All significant events are notified consistently. This demonstrates that the agency is taking appropriate action to promote the welfare of children and young people in their care.

The Registered Manager and panel members are professionally qualified with a proven track record in children's services, child protection and safeguarding. The agency has an annual training programme in place which foster carers say is very valuable. The manager receives monthly supervision and panel members are appraised annually. This helps ensure the development of the agency positively impacts on children and young people's achievement.

There are good systems in place to ensure that there is effective monitoring of the agency. This helps to ensure high standards of care to drive improvement to provide good, safe placements. Regulation 35 monitoring reports are sent to Ofsted quarterly. The agency has a development plan in place that shows that the agency has the capacity to develop.

The agency is currently recruiting a senior social worker who will undertake the role of the supervising social worker and support the Registered Manager in participating in research in relation to children in foster care. The service remains financially viable.

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.