

Families@FamilyCare

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Families@FamilyCare Ltd is an independent fostering agency. The head office is based in Bamber Bridge, near Preston and it has a branch office in Bridgnorth, Shropshire. Foster carers are located in both the North West of England and in the Midlands. The agency recruits, assesses and approves foster carers who provide emergency, short term and long term placements for children and young people.

This branch currently has 58 approved foster carers in 32 households, caring for 42 children and young people. This is the agency's first inspection since it was re-registered in July 2012.

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 is effective as children and young people make good progress when placed with the agency's foster carers. Thorough analytical assessments are completed with a strong emphasis on safeguarding. Children and young people live in safe fostering households. Only those that the agency has confidence in will progress to approval.

Children and young people are well matched with their foster families. They are made to feel welcome and part of their foster family. Foster carers have access to

therapeutic support to enable them to respond to the behaviours of young people appropriately. Young people's placements are protected and supported and pressure is not placed on foster carers to take additional children or young people. Young people experience settled and stable placements and are developing attachments as a result.

Weaknesses that have been identified relate to the management functions and procedural shortfalls; particularly concerning the auditing of records and processes surrounding the functioning of the fostering panel. These have not impacted on the progress that young people are making or on their safety and welfare. Similarly, the retention and support offered to foster carers has not been affected. Some issues had already been identified by the provider as areas requiring improvement and work is already underway to address them.

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
3 (2011)	ensure that the written statement in relation to the fostering service ('the Statement of Purpose') is available on the agency's website (Regulation 3(2))	17/01/2014
4 (2011)	ensure that any review of the Statement of Purpose and children's guide is notified to Ofsted within 28 days (Regulation 4(b))	17/01/2014
35 (2011)	ensure that the monitoring systems established to monitor the matters set out in schedule 6 are effective. (Regulation 35(1)(a))	17/01/2014

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the agency decision-maker takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and the final set of panel minutes, prior to making a considered decision (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that the agency has a written development plan, that is reviewed annually, either identifying any planned changes in the operation or resources of the service, or confirming the continuation of the service's current operation and

resource (NMS 18.2)

- ensure that all individuals on the central list of persons suitable to be members of the fostering panel have references checked to assess their suitability before taking on responsibilities; and that telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references (NMS 19.1)
- ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them are clearly recorded; specifically that management decisions are clearly recorded (NMS 26.5)
- ensure that prior to appointing any panel member to the central list, the agency informs them in writing of their performance objectives; and that panel members sign an acceptance form to record their agreement to these objectives (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.14)
- ensure that the agency decision maker in reaching a decision lists the material taken into account; identifies key arguments; is satisfied that the panel has fully addressed the arguments; and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, para 5.40)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are well matched with foster carers who demonstrate an ability to meet their needs. Foster carers express confidence in the agency social workers knowing their family and abilities well. Consultation about second placements also takes place with the local authority with responsibility for the child or young person already in placement. Pressure is not put on foster carers to take additional placements and the needs of unrelated children are well matched and risk assessed. As a consequence placement stability is good and unplanned endings rare.

Children and young people are provided with a profile of their foster carers prior to their move. This is kept electronically so that the information can be sent to the local authority social worker and shared with the child prior to meeting their foster family. Young people say this was helpful as they were able to picture who would be looking after them. Following placement foster carers prepare a 'here and now' book for those in their care. This includes photographs and details of events and activities that the young person has been involved in following placement. This book provides the young person with a diary of their time in placement and moves on with the young person if the placement is a temporary one, ensuring that these memories remain alive for the young person even if they have returned to live within their birth family.

Children and young people are benefitting from secure, stable and in many cases long term placements with their foster carers. Many are also enjoying placements alongside their brothers and sisters. Contact with birth family members is promoted and facilitated by their foster carers. This helps children and young people to maintain their identity with their family of origin.

Children and young people are fully integrated into their foster families. They say

that they feel part of the foster family and are included in activities and family events. Young people talk about being able to experience new opportunities and have gained in confidence as a result. Foster carers receive clear guidance on the decisions that they are able to make and also demonstrate that they are good advocates for young people when they feel that the young person is not being listened too. Young people have developed trust and positive attachments to their foster carers as a result. Young people are confident in the commitment of their foster carers and plan to remain in their families into adulthood.

A particular strength of the service is their focus on therapeutic parenting. Foster carers and their social workers have access to a consultancy service with a clear focus on addressing the attachment needs of children and young people. Training is provided to foster carers generally and individual needs are also addressed. Individual work is also possible with children and young people, although this is commissioned separately.

Children and young people are able to express their views through their own social worker, the supervising social worker and are asked to complete agency questionnaires at regular intervals. If young people express a wish to meet with individuals in the organisation personally this has also been arranged. Children and young people have access to an independent advocate should they need one and to the children's rights service. The agency are in the process of setting up a consultation forum to seek the views of young people to help inform the future development of the service but this is not yet established.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency currently has sufficient foster carers to meet demand from placing agencies and has seen a small increase in the number of approved households in the last year. Although, the vacancy rate for the agency appears high, this is due to households having a child in placement who needs to be a sole placement at that time. The agency has a good understanding of the current need of placing agencies as it has been monitoring the type of placement required and locality requested. This information is being used to shape the agency's recruitment strategy for the forthcoming year.

The preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is thorough. One foster carer commented, 'Going through the fostering application process is not easy, but I my assessing social worker was extremely professional and sensitive'. Completed reports are analytical and there is a clear focus during assessment on the applicant's ability to meet the needs of children and young people requiring placement. This comprehensive preparation ensures that only the most suitable families complete the process. The agency employs a small number of independent assessors in order to ensure that applicants are not left waiting for assessment if they have made a decision to proceed. This ensures that assessments are completed within

recommended timescales.

The agency has an appropriate central list of panel members. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably qualified and experienced. The panel demonstrates appropriate vigour in reaching its recommendations.

Foster carers have access to a wide range of post approval training. Regular core training courses cover a range of issues, including; behaviour management; safe caring; child development; prevention of bullying; communicating with children; and equality and diversity. In addition, foster carers have been enabled to attend courses they have identified themselves and that are specific to the needs of the young people that they are caring for. For example, on attachment problems. Foster carers say, 'the training is on-going, relevant and well attended'. The agency expects all foster carers to have completed the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) standards in foster care within their first year of approval.

A high level of social work support is offered post approval. One foster carer commented, 'I have a brilliant working relationship with my social worker and she is able to offer me constructive feedback which I find really useful'. In addition, a 24-hour duty system is in place so that a social worker is always available for advice and support if required. One foster carer said that she appreciated this saying, 'when I had reason to call them they were there for us immediately. They were so supportive and it did not feel as though we were an inconvenience to them. You never feel like you are alone'.

More formalised support groups are also available for foster carers to meet with each other and provide peer support. The agency has recently introduced a small geographically based 'pod' system, so that foster carers have less distance to travel and the control of these is determined by the foster carers themselves. In addition, agency newsletters are distributed to foster carers to keep them updated on changes in the agency or forthcoming events; as well regular joint team meetings with agency staff and foster carers. These measures ensure that foster carers are kept informed and provide an opportunity for open discussion.

The agency works well with placing authorities to ensure that foster carers have the information they require on children and young people and to review their care plans. The agency also pursues agreements for delegated authority, although with varying degrees of success. One foster carer reported, 'the agency has stepped in for our foster children when sadly their local authority was struggling to meet their responsibilities. Our fostering agency regularly goes above and beyond their call of duty in children's best interests'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safety and welfare of children and young people is central to the agency's

operation. Children and young people say that they feel safe living in their foster placements. Both the agency staff and foster carers receive regular update training in safeguarding. All foster carers complete a safe caring policy that is specific to the child or young person that is in placement. This ensures that appropriate safeguards are in place to address any presenting behaviours by young people and that both foster carers and young people do not place themselves in vulnerable situations. A minority of young people are involved in risk taking behaviour, such as going missing from home. When incidents do occur foster carers are proactive and work alongside the placing authority to ensure that the young person understands the risk they may be placing themselves in.

The recruitment of foster carers and agency staff is thorough. Robust checks are completed prior to the individual starting work with children and young people. However, personal references have not been sought in relation to the recruitment to the central list of panel members. The agency is often familiar with the individuals it has recruited but without this additional check it is unable to be satisfied that it has a full picture about the suitability of the applicant.

Foster carers have a good understanding about how a child's previous experience of neglect or abuse may impact on their development and affect their responses. Foster carers report that this is part of their initial preparation but that post approval additional emphasis is placed on this and supported by access to therapists working in the agency. This ensures that foster carers are best equipped to respond to the behaviours presented by children and young people.

A range of policies and procedures serve to ensure that children and young people are protected and that foster carers know what is expected of them. This includes unannounced visits to foster carers and regular contact with children and young people by staff in the agency. Allegations and disclosures are handled sensitively. The agency works well with other agencies in these circumstances and the welfare of young people is promoted.

The agency's children's guide informs children and young people about their right to complain and how to seek independent support. Young people also see the agency's support workers on a regular basis; both within their foster home and on arranged activities. Young people expressed confidence in being able to contact a trusted adult if they need to. This ensures that young people have the opportunity to raise any issues of concern if they arise.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

While the leadership and management of the fostering agency requires improvement, there are some good elements. The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified and experienced, being registered by Ofsted in August 2013. Quarterly reports provide a thorough review of the service provided to children and

young people and they are submitted promptly to Ofsted. The monitoring of the progress that young people are making in foster care is also good. However, the monitoring and auditing of records kept by the agency was weak with information missing from some files; third party information contained on files; identified actions not being followed through; and reference to incorrect regulations and standards in agency procedures.

Staff receive regular supervision and feel well supported by the Registered Manager. One member of staff reported, 'I am involved and empowered with my supervisions, which are conducted monthly'. Although case discussion and decision making is clear on the record of supervision it is not evident on the case records for the foster carer or young person, making it difficult to understand who decided on a course of action and the reasons for this.

The strategic development of the agency requires improvement. There have been a number of changes in the senior management of the agency over recent months and the development plan for the agency is significantly out-of-date. Without a clear plan that is subject to regular review the direction of the agency is uncertain.

The agency has positive relationships with those commissioning its services. They report that communication with staff is good and that feedback from children's social workers about the quality of foster placements is positive. The agency seeks a dialogue with commissioners about their future need.

A number of weaknesses were identified in relation to files kept on the central list of panel members. Records are not maintained of the training undertaken; panel's actually attended; and appraisals although undertaken were not always evident on files. In addition, the agency has yet to establish a formal written agreement with members so that they are clear about their performance objectives.

Minutes of the fostering panel are good and contain a clear list of the reasons why the panel have reached a recommendation. The agency decision is made within timescales but only on receipt of the draft set of minutes. Additionally, it is not clear what documents the agency decision maker has considered, whether she is assured that the panel has addressed all the relevant issues, or what her own reasons are for reaching the decision made.

The agency has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose in place that is subject to regular review. However, it is not readily accessible to commissioners and foster carers via the agency's website and it has not been forwarded to Ofsted following review. A children's guide is available and young people confirm that they receive this on placement. The agency is currently in the process of reviewing this with a view to targeting it more appropriately to children of different ages.

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.