

Pathway Care (Midlands)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Pathway Care is a privately owned independent fostering agency made up of a number of individually registered regional services. Pathway Care (Midlands) is one of the regional services. It was first registered in February 2004 and is based in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. There is a sub-office, based in Coventry, linked to the Bromsgrove registration, and this office is primarily a drop-in information centre. The organisation's head office in Bolton retains senior management and human resources functions.

At the time of the inspection Pathway Care (Midlands) supported 106 foster carers with 130 children and young people in placement. Over the past year from 1 April 2013-31 March 2014 the agency has recruited 11 foster carers

Most Pathway Care (Midlands) placements provide mainstream foster care, including: long term; short term; permanency and parent and child and bridging placements. Emergency placements can also be provided. The service also offers placements for disabled children and young people and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

A range of views from children, foster carers and other stakeholders contributed to the inspection through surveys and discussion.

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**.

Children and young people have their individual needs met to a high standard. Some make exceptional progress and all develop good relationships with their carers.

There are a diverse range of carers which means there is an excellent range of placements to meet the needs of the children and the local authorities placing them.

The preparation of carers and their continued development through training and support ensures that there is an exceptionally skilled and professional pool of carers able to care for children with a diverse range of needs.

Young people are very happy, develop strong relationships with their carers and feel safe and well cared for. Children have positive and nurturing experiences, which help them to move positively towards adulthood.

The quality of the assessment and approval processes is high and ensure that only those people who have the understanding about the needs of children and the skills to meet these are approved.

Foster carers are extremely well supported, in their often difficult role, by supervising social workers and support workers who are committed and dedicated to making placements for children work. Children look forward to visits by workers from the agency and feel they are listened to by them. The range of support services available are impressive and as a result placements are stable and maintained and children make excellent progress. The disruption rate in this agency is below the national average.

Foster carers are highly valued by the agency as are their views the child they are caring for; carer's views inform the care planning for the child. The agency is child-centred and places the welfare and safety of young people at the very centre of operational practice. The leadership and management of the agency are strong and the manager inspires staff and uses the views of people who use and commission the services to inform future developments. The agency forges sound working relationships with local authorities and other agencies in order to ensure that the services it provides are effective.

Although shortfalls have been identified, they are largely about procedure and process and there is little or no impact on children's lives as a result of these. The recommendations relate to: recording a risk assessment in relation to fire evacuation in one case; the arrangements for escalating concerns about delays by local authorities in arranging services for children; following the documented procedure, in every case, when undertaking post allegation reviews and the need to continue to encourage all carers to undertake mandatory and ongoing training.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure that all risk assessments, in respect of the home environment, take full account of any potential hazards and identify how risks have been minimised (NMS 10.3)
- continue to engage positively with foster carers with completion of the Training, Support and Development Standards and with training generally (NMS 20.3; 20.6)
- ensure that action taken by the agency is always fully compliant with the service's policies and procedures; this is with specific reference to closely following the organisation's procedures and recording requirements when in carrying post allegation reviews (NMS 25.2)
- ensure that the registered person takes effective action where concerns arise, this is with specific reference to ensuring that issues raised with placing social workers are clearly documented and escalated to more senior representatives within the authority if required. (NMS 25.8)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Most children and young people settle well in their foster placements very quickly. This is because fostered children are welcomed into the home exceptionally well by carers and their children who understand the fostering task. One young person commented, 'I feel like part of their family.' Children and young people's experience of living in foster care is 'normalised' because delegated authority is properly addressed so that carers can make day-to-day decisions. Children and young people's ethnic, cultural and religious needs are met to a high standard because the agency has robust and effective matching processes. Unaccompanied young people seeking asylum are successfully placed with carers who meet their complex needs. Some older young people have been able to stay with their foster family after they have reached the age of 18. Some have successfully moved into independent living with the support of their carers. Some children and young people gain legal security through the granting of an adoption or special guardianship order; for some this is with their foster family. Those who move into another family, to be placed for adoption for example, are extremely well prepared for the move by their carers. This means they have the best opportunities to develop secure attachments to their adoptive parents. Commissioning officers confirmed that the placement stability rate in this agency is excellent.

Children feel safe and are safe living with foster carers who care deeply about them. Most children and young people make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives.

They begin to take responsibility for their more challenging and risky behaviours and these reduce, and in some cases stop. For example, incidences of being missing from care for some young people have ceased. All young people are attending their education. Most children and young people's educational attendance and their levels of achievement have shown significant improvement because they have learnt the value education has on their life chances. One young person's school described the young person as 'very polite and hardworking.... with exemplary attendance and punctuality.' Another young person has recently achieved straight 'A's in their exam results.

Children and young people have fun with their foster carers and with friends because they are involved in activities that interest them. Children and young people learn new skills and develop new interests because of the opportunities they are provided with. For example, some young people have become engaged in projects such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and others attend a local Scout or Cub group or have joined a local football club. Their horizons are also broadened through the range of interesting and educational holidays their carers take them on both in the UK and abroad.

Children and young people's health improves, they attend routine appointments and their immunisations are up to date. Services to meet more specialised needs are tirelessly advocated for by the supervising social workers and the carers; although these are not always forthcoming from local authorities.

Children and young people begin to understand their family history and identity and from this begin to make sense of their situation. However, progress for some children in this area is hindered because not all local authorities are supporting this work effectively. Children and young people develop or maintain positive relationships to people who are significant to them because carers are dedicated in promoting positive contact, in a non-judgemental way. Carers think about how to make the best out of the situation by structuring the time children and their parents spend together, for example, by preparing and taking a picnic lunch along so that the family can share a relaxed meal together. Children and young people's potential to experience emotional distress after a family contact is recognised, understood and catered for so that they are supported effectively to deal with this.

Children and young people benefit from retaining clear memories of their time living with the foster family. This is achieved through the dedication of the agency and carers to ensure, through the use of individualised memory boxes, for example, that each achievement and event is recorded in a way that best suits the child's age and level of understanding. Some children return to live with their birth family and where possible carers also keep in touch with them and their family when a child has returned home.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

There are placements to meet a range of diverse needs. Potential foster carers are warmly welcomed by the agency. A foster carer said, 'We looked at other agencies but this was most responsive, efficient and professional.' A well-established carer simply said, 'Pathway are the tops.'

The preparation and assessment of carers are of a very high quality. Foster carers are extremely well-prepared for, and have an excellent grasp of, the fostering task. The assessment process is robust and ensures that those approved are suitable and able to parent children and young people to a high standard. While there was some differential in the standard of the analysis of assessment reports the recently written assessment reports were of a good quality and analytical. The panel exercises its quality assurance function very well in respect of assessment reports which have improved over time.

Most carers view the preparation as the start of their caring career. Most embrace the excellent, research based, post approval training opportunities. This helps to further develop their skills, knowledge and understanding of the needs of the children and young people they care for. Extremely effective supervision of carers is well targeted at looking at the needs of the children and young people in placement. It identifies the support and developmental needs the carers may have in order to care for the child or young person effectively. Training is sourced to support the carer's development when required. Many comments were made by carers about the range and quality of training including: 'Training is really good quality', 'Training is fantastic' and 'The training on attachment blew us away.' Carers could also identify the positive impact the training had on their parenting skills. One said, 'It really helps me to understand needs and adjust my parenting to suit these.' And 'You use it when working with the children.' There is also excellent support and training for foster carers' children to help them understand the fostering task the family is undertaking. Over the past year considerable progress has been made in relation to some carers who had been reluctant to engage with training opportunities, including the completion of the Training, Support and Development Standards.

The fostering panel is robust and challenges the agency appropriately and effectively. Clear judgements and recommendations are made and the minutes of the meetings are comprehensive. These inform the decision maker when she is making her decision. Panel members have annual appraisals and appropriate access to training. While the panel's central list is low on numbers this is being addressed through a current recruitment campaign.

The agency has robust referral and matching processes; these are also undertaken for respite placements. Full consideration is given to the carer's skills and the needs of young people, including those already living in the home. The detailed carer's profiles, the sharing of information about the child or children and the support given to carers to consider the impact a placement may have on their family also support the matching process. This work helps to make sure that stable placements are made and maintained. Placing authorities do not always provide full or correct information about a child's needs. However, the agency is robust in following this up so that the child or young person can be cared for effectively. A commissioner said,

'The agency is very proactive in chasing paperwork ...we are aware there are shortfalls and I challenge our local authority team managers regularly regarding this because Pathway challenge me.' Another said that Pathway makes, 'An effective response to placement issues as they arise.'

Carers are consulted well and kept informed about any changes or developments in care planning for the child they are caring for; they feel exceptionally well valued by the agency and a part of the team around the child. They have excellent opportunities to express their views and are excellent advocates for the children they care for.

The arrangements for, and investment in, supporting foster families and children are impressive and help to make and maintain stable placements. There is excellent day-to-day support from the supervising social workers and the family support workers. A carer said, 'When I needed support it was always there Pathway was there with us all the way.' Consultations with a psychology service commissioned by the agency can be sourced to provide advice and support. There is a dedicated 24-hour duty system that means that foster carers can call for help or advice when they need it. There are a wide range of activity and family days that families and children enjoy. One carer said, 'Activity days are excellent-real family affairs.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The overall dedication to good quality well-documented risk assessments means that young people are cared for safely and live in a safe environment. However, in one case, it was not clearly documented what the arrangements would be should a fire break out when the child was in the room alone; this is especially relevant in this case due to the location of the room. Children and young people's safety is further supported by both the good quality safe care plans and additional risk assessments. For example, for managing presenting behaviours which have the potential to place a young person at risk such as self-harm, being missing from home and inappropriate use of the internet. These ensure that young people are safe and are supported to undertake age appropriate activities safely.

Carers are clear about the procedures to follow when a young person is missing from care and act properly to protect them. The 24-hour duty system ensures carers always have advice and support at any time of the day or night; this is highly valued by carers. Missing from home rates have reduced and it is rare that a young person goes missing. Further safeguarding precautions include monitoring, via a minimum of two unannounced visits a year to the foster home, by the supervising social worker and an additional announced visit carried out by a manager.

Young people feel safe in their placements and carers prioritise their well-being; for example, through raising complaints or concerns with placing social workers when necessary. Young people are clear about who they would talk to if they had a worry or concern and are confident that their concerns would be addressed. The child-

centred approach taken by the agency provides young people with ample opportunities to express their concerns and influence practice; for example, through the young people's group and questionnaires.

Staff, carers and the children of carers understand and implement the safeguarding procedures should a concern arise. They follow the required reporting procedures. When a young person makes a disclosure the agency reports the issue in timely and appropriate way to the relevant local authority and local authority designated officer (LADO). The agency follows the advice from the LADO and a LADO commented positively on working with agency. She said they share information well, attend relevant meetings and follow any advice given. Carers said that the agency provides them with good support in these situations and all carers have access to FosterTalk for independent support and advice should an allegation be made about them.

The agency carries out post allegation reviews routinely and presents these to the panel; however, it does not always closely follow the organisation's procedures in relation to the independence of the investigator nor are all the various stages of decision making fully recorded. However, this has had no impact on children or young people.

The organisation has an internal safeguarding board that comes together as a group and reviews all incidents and occurrences. It produces statistical information to identify any patterns or trends, for example, regarding missing from home, medication administration, restraints, and allegations. From this information any training shortfalls are identified and addressed.

Staff, carers and panel members are appropriately recruited and assessed to ensure they are suitable to undertake their respective roles; this helps to protect children and young people from those who are unsuitable to work with children. Children and young people feel involved in the recruitment of carers and social work staff because they have devised questions that are asked of applicants.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The leadership and management of this agency are highly regarded by placing authorities. Managers work effectively with local authority commissioners and positive, professional relationships have developed. There is a strong focus on, and investment in, the recruitment of foster carers and the agency takes an innovative approach to broadening the range of placements available. For example, the agency has set up an information drop-in centre in Coventry; this targets people in this geographical area. It also secured a pilot scheme for providing emergency placements. The success of some of these placements have led to some young people remaining with their emergency carers on a longer-term basis. The agency is also developing other innovative schemes. For example, a scheme targeted at taking children and young people out of residential care and placing them into family placements. A commissioning officer for a local authority stated, 'Pathway develops

to meet our needs.'

There are sophisticated processes for monitoring all areas of the agency's operation and practice and regular monitoring reports are submitted for organisational scrutiny. There is very good management oversight of young people's progress or lack of progress. This means that social workers are kept informed about a young person's development and individualised, focused support can be provided. There is a strong focus on promoting the safety, progress and well-being of children and young people.

Children, young people, foster carers and stakeholders are involved in the development of services. There are a range of user engagement groups, for example, a foster carer forum and a youth council. These groups fully involve foster carers and children and young people in the development of services. The youth council is particularly active in addressing children's issues. A range of child-friendly surveys have been developed and are used effectively to improve their experience in foster care. An annual survey is carried out that clearly shows the level of satisfaction with the service which is high.

People are informed about what services the agency provides through a comprehensive Statement of Purpose and an informative website. There are a range of policies and procedures that are known by, and easily accessible to, staff and foster carers.

Since the agency was taken over in 2011 there has been ongoing review of processes and recording systems. Staff and carers feel they have been fully involved in the development of these and there continues to be ongoing consultation with staff and carers to inform future developments.

All the staff and managers are of a high calibre, enthusiastic, committed and well qualified and experienced in their respective roles. There is regular, robust supervision which is targeted to address individual development and support needs and casework. However, on occasion, local authority social workers do not address issues that are raised with them by the supervising social workers.

Managers have a strong presence within the agency. They have an open door policy and make themselves available to staff for advice and consultation. Staff and carers have confidence in the managers. A member of staff said, 'Our managers lead by example, they're not frightened to get stuck in.' The manager has good awareness of the agency's strengths and areas for development and takes action to address shortfalls. The recommendation from the last inspection has been met and this means that the information on the children's register is easily accessible.

Staff have very good access to training opportunities, are supported to undertake further qualifications and can undertake training in areas of special interest, for example, social pedagogy.

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.