

# Family Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Responsible individual</b>	Robert Martin Rae
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	18/06/2012

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Family Foster Care is a privately owned fostering agency. The parent company, Family Foster Care Limited, has one other agency registered with Ofsted. The base in the Midlands provides operational support to other parts of the country and is also a regional hub. This inspection occurred in Malvern but included evidence from a concurrent inspection at the office in Beverley, which is currently part of the same registration.

The agency mainly provides children with long and short term foster placements. Currently, there are 27 households with a total of 32 carers who care for 28 children.

### 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: **requires improvement.**

This agency was registered in 2008. In 2009 it was judged to be operating at an adequate standard and in 2011 it was judged to be inadequate. At the last inspection in 2012 the shortfalls had been addressed and the service was at a satisfactory standard. This has been maintained and the service remains at a standard that requires improvement. However, there has been a substantial and effective review of the organisation, which has produced important strategic changes. At this point in time there is insufficient data to compare this agency to the national picture.

The service now benefits from a much greater sense of purpose and improvement. This is critical because the shortfalls (five requirements and four recommendations are made) are mainly the result of insufficient monitoring. Other key areas for attention include the training of carers. Carer's mandatory training is not prioritised sufficiently, for example in a single behaviour management system and the management of medicines. The thorough assessment of new applicants requires consolidation, as does the regular supervision and training of all members of staff.

The Registered Manager resigned earlier this year and an experienced manager started work in June. Substantial improvements have already occurred in some areas but, as yet, it is too soon for there to be consolidated good practice in all areas. At present, this agency is also responsible for carers in Beverley, but an application is in hand for a separate registration. This will allow the service in that area to be managed locally.

Children benefit from a good level of direct care from carers they trust, with high levels of continuity and safeguarding. They feel positive about the care they receive and benefit from regular consultation. Many of the children live in solo-placements but in all cases there is a high level of personalised care. There are relatively few children or carers from different religious or cultural backgrounds.

## 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
13 (2011)	take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulation 13(1). This is with regard to implementing a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline (Regulation 17(2))	26/01/2015
17 (2011)	provide foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them (Regulation 17(1))	26/01/2015
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training (this is with particular regard to missing from care), supervision and appraisal (Regulation 21(4)(a))	05/01/2015
26 (2011)	obtain the information specified in Schedule 3. This is with regard, for example, to Form F reports adequately investigating health issues (Regulation 26(2), Schedule 3(2))	08/12/2014
35 (2011)	ensure there is a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. This is with regard to it addressing all the required issues (including restraints) and being evaluative (Regulation 35(1))	08/12/2014

## Recommendations

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

- ensure the service implements a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. This is with regard to risk assessments facilitating proportionality by quantifying the likelihood of occurrence and degree of hazard (NMS 4.5)
- ensure there is a clear and comprehensive summary of any allegations made against a particular member of the fostering household, or staff member, including details of how the allegation was followed up and resolved, a record of any action taken and the decisions reached, is kept on the person's confidential file. A copy is provided to the person as soon as the investigation is concluded. The information is retained on the confidential file, even after someone leaves the organisation, until the person reaches normal retirement age or for ten years if this is longer (NMS 22.7)
- ensure the service has and implements a written policy that clarifies the purpose, format and content of information to be kept on the fostering service's files, on the child's files and on case files relating to foster carers (NMS 26.1)
- support the foster carer to contribute effectively to the review of children's care plans, which includes the placement plan. This is with regard to implementing effective tracking of children's progress. (NMS 31.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The vast majority of children experience positive outcomes. They feel safe in their foster homes, which allows them to make progress socially and educationally. One young person said, 'I feel much less stressed now, so I can concentrate at school.' They develop secure relationships with their carers because, as one put it, 'They have made me feel part of their family and are always there for me.' Older children in particular are able to reflect on their improved ability to make decisions with confidence. One spoke about taking control of his dealings with children's services and several described setting ambitious but attainable goals for their futures.

Children experience consultation every day and learn to believe that their views are important. Increasingly, their opinions are making a difference to the operation of the service too. The support of advocates is provided, when necessary, to ensure children's views are heard by local authorities. Importantly, group consultation exercises also serve to make children feel less isolated. The activities that children engage in with the agency led one to say, 'It means we don't feel alone.' Children have good health and their medical appointments are up-to-date. A psychologist has been retained to provide carers and staff with regular advice. This is an important

improvement and will help to address the emotional and psychological problems faced by many looked-after children. Children also experience a range of stimulating activities with their carers, including various holidays and the pursuit of special interests.

Older children in particular receive encouragement to become as practically independent as possible. The option to remain in placement past their eighteenth birthday is discussed although there has been minimal take-up so far. The majority are in their home areas and they experience good attention to the agreed family contact arrangements. The majority of children enjoy long term placements and there is a good level of stability overall. In some cases, this has led to carers obtaining Special Guardianship Orders so that children can feel completely secure.

All school age children are in some sort of education; this compares very favourably with other agencies, although the overall attainment levels are somewhat unclear (see below). However, individual cases indicate that most children are doing well at school, with some making remarkable progress and others simply recovering lost ground. Others have achieved special awards or have been assigned additional responsibilities, including being designated an anti-bullying ambassador.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The quality of care is mixed and lacks consistency in some areas. This has a low impact on children but leads other professionals to have reservations, for example, regarding some unplanned endings. On the other hand, external agencies acknowledge that the arrival of the new manager in Malvern has resulted in improvements, for example, in the assessment of the agency's performance and in the scrutiny of carers. Children's placement plans are monitored but not in as much detail as possible. This means that the progress made by children is not sufficiently evident. Similarly, risks are identified and addressed but in an elementary way that does not facilitate meaningful identification of progress. Improvements are necessary in order to identify changes a) to professionals, so that appropriate support can be more readily provided, and b) to accurately communicate changes to children.

As a reaction to modest increases in the net number of carers, substantial improvements have been made to how new carers are recruited, including the development of a better on-line process and the appointment of one person to oversee initial enquiries. This provides applicants with a more efficient and effective service but is relatively new. New foster carers report favourably on the speed with which their initial interest is followed up and the active involvement of the directors. This helps to achieve the target of providing a 'family feel' in localised services. Recruitment processes aim to obtain a representative cross-section of the communities in which the agency operates. Matching has also been reviewed to address carer concerns about vacancy rates. In particular, the appointment of new, highly experienced senior staff to geographical hubs is creating improvements, including reducing the number of carers moving to other agencies.

Since the last inspection, the quality of analysis in the assessments of new carers has varied and in some cases the panel has raised significant concerns, for example, regarding insufficient analyses of health issues. Steps have recently been taken to address this, including some changes of personnel, and there is now close monitoring of assessments at interim stages. As a result, staff and panel members feel more confident in the process and there is better quality assurance of applicants. This reduces the likelihood, for example, of children experiencing placement disruptions, of carers not attending sufficient training, and other difficulties.

Carers are almost universally positive about the support provided by their supervising social workers and the support workers. One carer represented many when she said, 'I'm happy to be with them; I'm made to feel that I'm important to the service', another said, 'They always make you feel part of the team and don't undermine your abilities'. Major improvements have been made recently to the support of carers via regular meetings in the hubs (Malvern, Beverley and Milton Keynes). Similarly, carers feel there is reasonable support of their own children, who are an intrinsic part of fostering households. The frequency of unannounced visits to carers is above the minimum requirement and is an important contribution towards ensuring that households are safe places for looked after children.

On the other hand, although there is an improved plan of training events for carers and good attention to achieving the development standards within a year of approval, significant shortfalls remain. This issue was also raised during the last inspection. Shortfalls include a lack of individual development plans for carers; unclear understanding about what constitutes sufficient development (including training) each year; drift in completing mandatory courses (including first aid), and a list of mandatory courses that does not include medicine administration and management. As a result, some carers have not undertaken any training in several years and others have completed many courses but not completed mandatory ones. This means that competency levels vary and the service to children is inconsistent. This is demonstrated by the arrangements for the mandatory training about behaviour management. Some carers have not received such training and others have received alternatives that do not necessarily prepare them in the way required. This is significant when placements are becoming disrupted.

Two panels are in operation, one based in Malvern and another that covers the hub in Beverley. On the whole, these work well and hold the service to account. Improvements are underway at present to allow regional managers to be involved in their panel meetings; to improve the range of skills amongst panel members, and to have a new decision maker. Consistency has been improved lately by increasing the corporate oversight of both panels. The foster carer annual reviews are considered by panel after a year, as required and then every three years. This is a useful additional level of independent scrutiny of carers and the service.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Carers are successfully keeping children safe. Senior personnel in particular have a thorough understanding of child protection issues and apply thorough recruitment processes. There have been few incidents requiring input from external agencies and liaison with them is open. One social worker said, 'The fostering service works in close partnership with myself in order to make sure the young person's needs are met. The fostering social worker has a fantastic relationship with the foster carer.' There has been good communication with Ofsted.

Apart from a small number of incidents in which children were briefly absent, safeguarding issues are minimal. However, the understanding of some supervising social workers of the missing from care protocol requires improvement. This has resulted in some children being reported missing unnecessarily, which increases anxieties. It also raises the perceived level of risk disproportionately and distorts the individual child's records. Training in safeguarding children is mentioned below and is also required by administrative staff.

Carer's properties are routinely reviewed and safety issues are addressed, including vehicle safety. Safe caring policies and risk assessments (see above) are also up-to-date. Incidents of restraint are reportedly nil. However, in light of the shortfalls and variations in the training of carers in behaviour management, this data requires verification to ensure that all physical interventions are appropriate.

Children know how to complain; they are seen regularly by supervising social workers, and they all have external contacts with whom they can raise any concerns. Children feel safe but several allegations have been made against carers. These have been investigated appropriately. However, in some cases they have not been followed by clear reviews of carers' approval and as a result carers have not been sent summarising letters. This leaves them vulnerable in the event a subsequent inquiry into their performance; this matter also applies to staff. A recent improvement is the retention of an external professional to investigate complaints more independently. This investment provides carers and staff with greater confidence in the process.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Several issues have combined recently to challenge and change the agency. A full external review of the organisation led to changes in the director's roles and greater clarity of other governance arrangements. Concurrently, the Malvern office became responsible for carers in the Beverley region. This was managerially challenging, although for most carers and children it was seamless. Subsequently, the manager resigned and a new manager started in June. The new manager has the necessary experience and qualifications and has applied to Ofsted for registration. The ambitions to expand the organisation are now tempered with a realistic understanding of the high standard of staff and systems necessary for a good quality service.



The new manager has a realistic impression of the tasks that are required but has been in post too briefly to address them all. Consolidation of the changes he makes will then take longer. Monitoring of the service has been adequate at best. As a result, patterns and trends have not been evaluated and some issues have been overlooked, such as health and medication. Although the monitoring has been improved, there remain gaps in practice. Gaps have continued until recently, for example, in the supervision, appraisal and development of social work and administrative staff. This issue was also raised as a recommendation at the last inspection.

The last inspection raised three requirements and six recommendations. Carers now receive such training as is necessary for them to meet individual children's needs. This means that children receive a higher standard of care. De-registrations are now managed in such a way that leaves carers fully understanding the position. Carers are now routinely provided with all the information that is available about new children. A procedure is now used in which requests to provide documents are directed at increasingly senior local authority personnel. Also of direct benefit to children are the improved arrangements for obtaining sufficient delegated authority from local authorities, and an improved range of children's guides, which introduce them to fostering.

A new electronic record keeping system has been in place for about twelve months. A senior member of staff elsewhere in the company has been tasked with ensuring the system is used consistently. However, this is not the case yet. Similar documents are stored in different locations and in some cases are not saved accurately. This creates practical difficulties and delays. More importantly, it creates obstacles if a carer or child wishes to see their file or in the event of an investigation.

## 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.