

Pilgrims Corner Fostering Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Rosemary Chapman
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Registered manager	Lynn Wilkinson
Responsible individual	Sarah Norman
Date of last inspection	11/11/2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Pilgrims Corner Fostering Ltd is a privately owned independent fostering agency which currently has six fostering households and four children and young people in placement. The agency has recruited three fostering households within the last year. It offers short-term, long-term, respite and emergency placements.

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 agency has made significant improvements since its last inspection in November 2013, when it was judged as inadequate overall. Recruitment of foster carers and placement of children have been limited during the last year, while the agency addressed the shortfalls and improved its practice. However, the appointment and registration of a permanent manager with extensive relevant experience has had a significant impact, resulting in a good judgement in every area and overall. All the requirements and recommendations from the previous inspection have been successfully addressed, and although a small number of recommendations in relation to documentation have been made as a result of this inspection, these do not have a significant impact on the experience and progress of children and young people, which is judged as good.

Children and young people have positive experiences and make good progress in

their foster placements, particularly in relation to education. They are happy, safe and settled and very much a part of the fostering household while maintaining positive relationships with their own families where appropriate. They have a strong voice and are fully supported to express their wishes and feelings and be heard.

Foster carers are prepared, assessed and approved through a formal, robust process to ensure they have the right skills to be a foster carer. They are well supported through regular supervision and a comprehensive training programme to enable them to contribute effectively as part of the team around the child. Their opinions, and those of the children and young people, are regularly canvassed and inform decision making.

There are good, effective working relationships with partner agencies, particularly local authority placing social workers. Good communication and consistent working practices lead to improved outcomes for the young people in foster care. Well trained, well supported, enthusiastic staff, good managerial oversight and systematic monitoring further support the work of the service to ensure it continues to operate effectively.

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 the written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and produced in a timely way. This relates to ensuring the roles of panel members are clearly stated (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the children's guide is written in a more child-friendly manner and made available in other formats if required (NMS 16.6)
- ensure the record of staff supervision details the time, date, and length of each supervision. (NMS 24.5)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are happy and settled in their foster placements and make positive attachments to their carers. One stakeholder commented: 'This is the first placement where he has been happy.' Since the last inspection, placement stability has been good, with no unplanned endings, although the small number of placements makes any assessment of trend statistically difficult.

An area which has been developed since the last inspection, but has yet to be implemented as there have been no new placements, is that children and young people are to be given a family book about the foster carers prior to moving in. This

is to enable them to have some basic information about what is happening to them and thus settle better.

Children and young people are making remarkable progress educationally and their attendance is excellent, ranging from 98% to 100%. One young person is on target to apply for university, an option that was not thought possible prior to his placement with the foster carers.

Children and young people experience a wide variety of opportunities to enhance their social and developmental skills and enjoy and achieve. For example, they play golf, basketball, football, go swimming, attend after school and youth clubs and go on holiday with their foster carers. Their self-esteem and confidence improve as a result of their experiences and successes. They also develop skills which help them move on to independence, such as helping with domestic chores, cooking, walking home from school and making independent bus journeys.

Children and young people are in good health. For some, this has improved significantly, for example, in relation to dental care. Their emotional and psychological well-being has also improved as a result of the care and support they have received while in their foster placements. This has also had a positive impact on behaviour within the foster home. A stakeholder commented about a young person: 'He has completely changed for the better; he is calm, very settled, and very happy.'

Children and young people have positive contact with family members during their time in foster care. Some are placed with their siblings, while others have regular contact with brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents. This enables them to maintain positive and important relationships and supports their understanding of their identity. They also have friends to stay, or go to visit friends to promote their positive involvement in the community.

Children and young people have a strong voice, and their wishes and feelings are paramount. This is evident because access to independent advocacy has been facilitated on a number of occasions, when plans for their care did not accord with what the children and young people wanted. Foster carers and the agency are fully supportive of children and young people exercising their rights in this regard. Children's and young people's voices are also heard through their own statutory reviews, foster carer annual reviews, surveys which the manager undertakes as part of her monitoring, and during visits to carers.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The quality of service provided is an area where there has been significant improvement since the last inspection. Recruitment of carers has been limited in the last year, but those carers who are newly recruited spoke very positively about the quality of their preparation, assessment, approval and support. There is now a better structure in place to assure a more consistent and robust process. This includes a

Skills to Foster course, assessments undertaken by a small number of 'tried and tested' independent assessors, consistent staff and clear expectations for the level of support and training. This was not in place a year ago. As a result, the quality of assessments is much more analytical and foster carers have a clear understanding of their role, their responsibilities and how they link in with other professionals who are involved with a child or young person.

The fostering panel is appropriately constituted and chaired by an experienced, knowledgeable chairperson, providing robustness to the approval and review of foster carers. The membership offers a range of personal and professional experiences which add depth to the quality of the discussions, although both the panel chair and the agency wish to expand the central list and make it more diverse. The panel understands its role in relation to quality assurance and works independently of the agency while maintaining a professional, supportive relationship. However, the minutes do not readily demonstrate that the panel is quorate (although this is the case) as the role of members is not specified. Additionally, the minutes are not produced in a timely way, perhaps due in part to the lack of a panel administrator. These shortfalls do not have a significant impact due to the limited volume of work currently and prompt decision making, which is carried out by an appropriately qualified and experienced independent agency decision maker.

Matching of children to foster carers is another area which has seen significant improvement, although no matches have been made in practice. There are now clear systems to ensure that the needs of children are assessed, documented and matched with the skills of carers, with shortfalls clearly identified and addressed. There is also a clear expectation that local authority documentation is provided either prior to placement or as close as possible afterwards. Currently, all children and young people have delegated authority documentation and local authority plans and reviews on their files so that foster carers are clear about their responsibilities and the actions they can take.

The agency places children and young people with challenging and complex needs, including learning disabilities and autism. Foster carers have training in these areas so that they can meet the needs of these children and young people and respond to them with appropriate skill and understanding. One stakeholder commented: 'They could not provide any better care.'

Foster carers can and do access in-house therapeutic support, as well as universal services such as the child and adolescent mental health service. A stakeholder commented about a foster family: 'They have completely changed their parenting style as a response to therapy, and as a result there has been a big change in the young person's behaviour at home over the last few weeks.'

Foster carers comment that the agency has significantly improved over the last year. They say that communication is much better and there is now consistency. They benefit from the regular supervision, support and access to training and feel valued by the agency. This in turn helps them value the children and young people they

support. They ensure the foster children feel part of the fostering family while supporting family contact where appropriate. Currently, any respite care is provided by the foster carers' own family members to normalise this experience.

All the foster carers have completed the Training, Development and Support standards and there is a clear expectation, laid out in the foster carer agreement, that this will be completed within the first year after approval, in addition to other core training such as first aid, safeguarding and recording. Thereafter the agency expects primary carers to complete at least six relevant courses a year to ensure they maintain and develop their knowledge and skill base. Foster carers were able to comment on how this had been beneficial, for example in relation to animal safety.

Supervision of foster carers is regular, comprehensive and well documented. Any issues are clearly followed through. Records of this supervision are shared with the local authority social workers to promote transparency and consistent working practices for the benefit of the child. Foster carers are also well supported in any meetings, such as children in care reviews, to ensure that there is effective partnership working and good communication to promote the children's best interests. One stakeholder commented: 'The supervising social worker is fantastic and she produces excellent reports for the statutory reviews.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are protected from harm and feel safe in their foster families. They know how to make a complaint or raise a concern and have access to a range of adults, such as their social worker, the independent reviewing officer, an advocacy service or the foster carers' supervising social worker, who ensures she sees them alone at reasonable intervals.

Children and young people's safety is promoted because foster carers are recruited, prepared and assessed through a robust and systematic process which is designed to approve only those people who have the appropriate skills to care for looked after children. The initial Skills to Foster training addresses how children's previous experiences and neglect have an impact on their behaviour. This is further enhanced by core training which covers safeguarding and safe care. Foster carers have all the relevant information and procedural guidance in their handbook so they can readily access it. This includes missing from home protocols as well as how to manage allegations.

Thorough and regular supervision of carers addresses any safeguarding issues. The agency undertakes at least one unannounced visit a year, although more will be done if necessary. These visits have a clear format so that the purpose is transparent and focused. This further promotes children's and young people's safety.

Children have regular and updated risk assessments and safe care plans which are used to inform carers' practice and promote children's safety and well-being. These

documents are comprehensive and individual to the specific child or young person. Children and young people are encouraged to take risks at an appropriate level to their age and understanding and as they develop independent living skills; this includes going to friends, using community facilities and having unsupervised time.

Staff demonstrate a robust understanding of their role in safeguarding children and working in partnership with the local authority, which is supported by training, supervision and procedural guidance. There are effective links with the Local Authority Designated Officer who is actively involved if allegations against carers or staff are made. The safeguarding policy is currently under review to ensure that it reflects current practice and is easily understood.

The children and young people in placement do not exhibit risk-taking behaviour such as drug and alcohol misuse or going missing from home. However, the agency has links with the relevant partner agencies who can provide additional support should this be needed.

Staff and panel members' recruitment is a thorough process which complies with good practice guidance. This ensures as far as possible that unsuitable people have no access to vulnerable children, young people or their foster carers.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The Registered Manager is a very experienced, appropriately qualified leader who has made a significant difference to the agency since her appointment. Twelve requirements and nine recommendations were made at the last inspection, covering all aspects of the service. These have all been satisfactorily addressed, resulting in an agency which is now good in all respects. Most importantly, children's and young people's outcomes in relation to education, health and independence are much improved and carers receive up-to-date information about children's plans, enabling them to provide more effective support. Foster carers are recruited more robustly and consistently and are better supervised and supported, enabling them to carry out their roles more effectively. The agency has developed formalised monitoring systems so it can more easily identify shortfalls and act swiftly to rectify these.

The agency has a clear understanding of the needs of children and young people who require foster placements. Placing social workers are very complimentary about the agency. Working relationships are positive and social workers are able to comment on how the work of the agency has improved outcomes for particular children, by, for example, encouraging foster carers to work in a particular way. Social workers say there is good communication, transparency and openness, and that the staff of the agency know the children and young people well.

Good tracking systems have been developed since the last inspection to enable the manager to monitor the progress which children and young people are making. This is carried out systematically through individual records on health, education and

independence which are used to inform the quarterly reports and graphs. Where progress is halted, this is explored and followed up.

There are good systems for monitoring and evaluating the service at all levels. The Registered Manager prepares monthly reports for the responsible individual which feed in to the monthly management meetings. The responsible individual understands the service well, is accessible to the carers and staff, and is committed to improving outcomes for young people. The manager undertakes bi-annual surveys of children and foster carers and notes any action points for the agency from the comments made. Changes to support groups and the development of family books have been made as a result of these surveys.

The Statement of Purpose is available on the website and provides information to carers and stakeholders about the services they should receive. There are two children's guides, covering two age groups, which are given to them on placement. However, these are not particularly child-friendly as they contain very few pictures and are rather lengthy in the information they provide.

There is currently one supervising social worker, who is well supported and supervised regularly to enable her to reflect on her practice. However, the record of supervision of both the social worker and the manager does not detail the time or length of the supervision meeting, so the quality of these sessions cannot be fully assessed. There is also access to good quality, relevant training. This ensures staff keep up to date and are able to develop their competence and knowledge.

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.