

Families Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Families Fostering, previously Families for Children, became one of the six branches of Compass Fostering, a private limited company, in October 2013. It provides short term, long term, emergency, and parent and child foster placements in the South East. At the time of this inspection the agency supported 193 households caring for 211 children and young people. During 2013-14 32 new households were approved.

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**.

Families Fostering came under new ownership just over a year ago. Children and young people have been protected from the impact of the transition period, which is coming to a close. Some staff and foster carers have left the agency but new staff and carers have been recruited. After initial anxiety and 'a culture shock' foster carers are happy to report that 'it feels like a merger, not a takeover'. This message has been conveyed by supportive leadership and management who have effectively engaged staff and foster carers in the planned developments of the service. Those working for the agency demonstrate a high level of energy and enthusiasm in their roles; they are striving for continual improvement in the service and the quality of care experienced by children and young people.

Children and young people make good progress from their starting points and enjoy

safe placements with foster carers who meet their needs well. Children and young people know the purpose of their placement and are positive about their experiences. Foster carers are well supported in caring for those placed with them; one described the support as 'fabulous' and the training 'brilliant'. Training is further developing and a company-wide positive psychological approach to caring for children is being rolled out by a consultant psychologist and her team.

There are developing participation strategies to ensure that children, young people and foster carers are formally involved in future developments. Carers feel well consulted; the role of ambassador has been welcomed. They describe communication as good and feel their voice is heard, for example, their views on the training programme have led to the introduction of online courses to improve accessibility.

Staff are suitably qualified and experienced. They identify themselves as a team and say the new open plan office has 'really improved inter-office working and the sharing of information and expertise'. The processes for the recruitment, assessment and approval of foster carers are robust and responsive to needs identified through partnership working. These good working relationships also promote the safety and welfare of children and young people. The agency's management of allegations and complaints is constructive, with learning informing practice.

Six recommendations to further improve practice are made. These mainly relate to records and record keeping. They include ensuring that: matching is robustly evidenced; strategies to minimise risk are identified; living safely together documents are meaningfully updated and child friendly foster carers' profiles are provided. Two relate to quality assurance processes, one for the panel and one for management monitoring. These shortfalls have limited or no impact on outcomes for children and young people.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- make available to children and young people, before arrival, information about the foster carer in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS11.3)
- ensure that if any gaps are identified when matching a child with a fostering household, the fostering service works with the responsible authority to secure an effective placement plan which sets out any additional training, resource or support required. This will be evidenced in the agency's matching form (NMS 15.1)
- demonstrate how the quality assurance feedback system is fully implemented, in particular ensure actions requested by panel are brought back for its

consideration (NMS14.2)

- demonstrate how children's safety and welfare is promoted, in particular by identifying in risk assessments the strategies to be used to minimise risk (NMS 4.1)
- demonstrate how foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children, in particular ensure that updates of the 'Living Together Safely' document are meaningful (NMS 4.2)
- demonstrate how monitoring identifies patterns and trends and how it uses this evaluation to inform agency developments. (NMS 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people's experiences, progress and outcomes are good. They are building positive attachments on the foundation of nurturing care and stability provided by their foster carers. They feel safe and part of the family, for example as they confidently seek physical comfort and reassurance from foster carers. This has a positive impact on many aspects of their lives. Some have friends to stay and there are reciprocal arrangements in place supported by delegated authority agreements. Risks to children and young people's safety and well-being are minimised and managed effectively. For those young people who are ready to address issues this has led to a reduction in risk taking behaviour. A foster carer said, 'measuring outcomes can be hard when you're in it, you need time to reflect on changes. It's a privilege to look after these children and see the changes'.

Children and young people are well supported in moving in and moving on. Where possible, children and young people meet foster carers before they move in. Where this is not possible the social worker may share the foster carer profiles available. These are not in child-friendly formats. Age-appropriate children's guides help them to understand how they will be looked after. Younger children are talked through the guide by a supervising social worker. Several children and young people achieve permanency with their foster carers either through long term fostering arrangements or adoption and stay past their eighteenth birthday. Those spoken with conveyed a real sense of belonging. Others move on to successful rehabilitation with families or independent living, including a number of parent and child placements, or appropriate residential resources.

The majority of children and young people are in full time education and most enjoy success. One young person described how 'extra tutoring through school really helped'. Those struggling with attendance are well supported through creative direct work by staff that aims to provide a platform for re-integration. A foster carer said 'the agency is fantastic at liaising with the school on behalf of the young person'. The implementation of the action plan by the newly appointed head of education aims to secure further support for children to achieve well. Children and young people enjoy a wide range of activities which encourage physical activity and develop new

interests and hobbies. These include horse riding, swimming, going to 'Rainbows' and staying to 'after school' clubs.

Children and young people's health is effectively promoted: all health needs are identified and addressed. Foster carers ensure they acquire the specialist support and knowledge necessary to meet complex needs and secure more specialist health input where required. As a result children and young people experience improved health outcomes such as good diet and exercise, reaching developmental milestones, and learning to manage their own health conditions. Young people working towards independence are given the information they need on which to base choices about healthy lifestyles, smoking, substance misuse and sexual health. They are the first to acknowledge that they do not always make the right choices, but are learning within a supportive framework. Children and young people get involved in age-appropriate household chores and so practice the self-care skills they will need for independence.

Children and young people benefit from robust and creative contact arrangements with family members as outlined in their care plans. Good relationships between foster carers and the children's parents contribute significantly to positive outcomes.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

There is an effective strategy in place for the recruitment of foster carers, energetically and enthusiastically led by the designated lead. The recruitment and marketing manager for the Compass group has a well-developed understanding of what is required and how it is to be achieved. This is kept under review and informed by regular liaison with commissioners and reflects the range of needs of children as well as their geographic requirements. The role of foster carers as recruitment ambassadors is bringing a new dimension to recruitment initiatives. There is currently limited diversity among the foster carers however they do reflect the cultural needs of the children placed.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is robust and ensures that they have a good understanding of their role and where it fits both with the agency and the placing authorities. Previously all assessments were undertaken by independent social workers. Now staff employed by the agency are taking on assessment work and are being supported in this by the new centralised assessment administration team. Children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour are well cared for by foster carers who in turn receive the training and support they need. Foster carers describe a 'child focused agency' and this has been maintained throughout the acquisition period.

Foster carers describe the range of support as 'excellent' and say 'They are always there for us, we wouldn't want to foster for anyone else'. They acknowledge that some of the changes brought in by the new company caused anxiety, out of hours support for example, but these fears have not been realised. They describe the agency social workers as responsive to extra support needs and feel that they work

in partnership with them. 'They are brilliant at pushing us forward to use our skills and expand them.' Foster carers value the peer support of carer ambassadors and use forum representatives to take issues forward from the support groups.

Foster carers say training is 'five star' and provide strong examples of how they have applied this in their work with young people, for example by 'helping a young person to release tension in a controlled way'. The training programme is emerging from a transitional phase. This saw the introduction of a philosophy and ethos with an emphasis on positive psychology, for foster carers to use in their delivery of care. The focus is on understanding the needs of the child, and not being side-lined by behaviour. Foster carers speak very positively about the difference this is making and how it has informed the way they care for children and young people. Ongoing access through monthly surgeries with the psychologist trainer is particularly valued. Not all foster carers achieved the training, support and development standards within their first year of approval. This has been addressed and all who should have completed these have now done so.

The fostering panel is undergoing change under the leadership of the newly appointed panel chair. The chair is experienced and knowledgeable and has brought this to bear in developing an action plan in conjunction with the Compass group assessment manager. The plan includes the expansion of the central list to increase the diversity and the range of knowledge and experience of the membership. The panel is well administered. The quality assurance function of the panel is developing. Panel minutes show that they have commented on gaps in information in foster carers' first reviews but there is no evidence that panel is updated in response to actions requested by the panel. Decision making is timely and based on full consideration of all the information.

Matching is generally well considered and evidenced, with some excellent provider response forms which detail how the identified needs will be met. However, the agency matching form is not as robust and does not always fully evidence the matching criteria. For example, a foster carer outlined how she is managing the identified risks but this is not addressed in the matching form. Foster carers' views on prospective placements are fully considered and there is no pressure from the agency to accept a placement.

Stakeholders describe communication and effective partnership working as strengths of the agency. They see the agency as pro-active is seeking information and advice and providing additional support to sustain placements.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safeguarding of children and young people is central to the work of the agency. The commitment to keeping children and young people safe is demonstrated in all aspects of their work. For example the safeguarding ethos is woven throughout the recruitment, preparation, assessment, supervision and training of foster carers. It is

also promoted by the positive encouragement of the reporting of concerns by all. The company has recently established an internal safeguarding board. The membership comprises all registered managers and heads of service across the organisation, an independent consultant and is chaired by the responsible individual. The board plan to have strategic oversight and lead learning through evaluation and sharing across all Compass services. The development of an overarching safeguarding policy has been the starting point, the draft is under review. Another change has been making supervising social workers responsible for all aspects of their work with foster carers. Previously safeguarding aspects were managed by a safeguarding team. Staff see this change as beneficial, and they 'feel more connected with the full safeguarding process'.

Foster carers have a good understanding of their role in working with children who may have suffered abuse. They are robust in appropriately supporting children and young people and taking action in response to disclosures. They work effectively in partnership with other professionals to help children and young people manage the impact of this, underpinned by an excellent understanding of age-appropriate risk taking. One said 'We have to let them risk take, we have to let them live their lives', a view shared by others. They are clear about their role in supporting children and young people to understand how to keep themselves safe. This begins at the point of moving in when children are talked through the foster carers' 'Living Together Safely' information. This information is reviewed regularly, although updates do not always include small changes that may need to be taken into consideration, for example, regularity of visits by family members.

Children and young people feel safe in their foster families. They know how to complain and do. There are a number of ways they can do this. In one instance a young person called the agency out-of-hours service. Supervising social workers know the children and young placement very well and ensure they children and young people without their foster carers at least once every six weeks. Complaints are managed well and outcomes are used to inform and develop practice.

The agency and foster carers actively seek suitable resources and/or input for children and young people on keeping themselves safe. The foster carers work on raising the awareness of young people of the potential consequences of any risk taking behaviour. Not all young people are prepared to acknowledge the risks but the message continues to be delivered in a variety of ways. Risk management is underpinned by risk assessments that are generally of a high standard. In some cases the strategies to minimise risk are not clearly identified. Where the agency identifies that the risks are unacceptable despite all the interventions, notice is given on the placement.

The agency monitoring of any children or young people who go missing or who may be at risk of sexual exploitation is sound. The incidence of young people reported missing or taking unauthorised absences from their placement is low in relation to national comparators. Not all instances of missing are followed up with a return interview or a reason for the absence. As a result agency learning from this is limited. The agency has well-established links with other safeguarding agencies.

They work effectively in partnership to promote the safety of young people and minimise the risks.

There is a pro-active approach to behaviour management. Foster carers use positive incentives and reward schemes. Where there is an identified need foster carers are trained in an approved behaviour management method that includes physical intervention. This is child specific and is well monitored.

The agency manages allegations against foster carers well. This includes cooperation with the relevant local authority and partnership working with the Local Authority Designated Officer. Carers are fully supported when allegations are made and they have access to independent professional support chosen by the foster carers. Some result in standards of care reviews for foster carers which may identify areas for development and training needs.

The agency ensures that only suitable people are employed as staff and panel members by the robust application of thorough recruitment and selection procedures.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This agency changed ownership in July 2013 and became part of Compass, a privately owned company offering placements to children through independent fostering agencies and children's homes. There has been significant restructuring which has resulted in a number of changes, including some redundancies and the appointment of a new responsible individual and registered manager. The past eighteen months have been a period of transition with some disruption caused by changes of office accommodation and personnel. Those staff and foster carers who found the changes difficult have made the decision to leave. The majority have come to terms with and are now embracing change, describing it as 'a necessary move' that has 'strengthened the management structure'. Staff and foster carers say the company wants to involve them at every level of the organisation. They have a good understanding of the vision for the service and the business model promoted by Compass, while keeping the ethos of the original company. Staff and foster carers feel appropriately challenged, energised, empowered and consequently valued by the company. The implementation of plans to develop a new therapeutic approach across the service is underway.

Leaders and managers have strong links and effective working relationships with placing social workers, commissioners and other agencies. Professionals describe communication as a key strength. A stakeholder commented 'There were some teething issues when Compass took over. However they are now coming through, we are working with people who share the same vision'. Regular liaison with local placing authorities ensures leaders and managers have a good understanding of children's needs and what is required to meet these. This liaison supports improved care, progress and outcomes for young people.

The management team are working on a new participation strategy to expand systems for obtaining the views of the full range of stakeholders to inform agency developments. Monthly monitoring arrangements are robust and ensure that those who need to know are kept up to date with the full range of the agency's work. There is limited evidence as to how effectively this monthly monitoring is used to provide strategic oversight to drive improvement. For example, there is limited qualitative evaluation of the unplanned endings overall to identify any themes or trends emerging to inform agency practice.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides accurately describe the service, so that those involved with the agency know what to expect. The foster carer handbook is comprehensive and well written making the information easily accessible. Foster carers are knowledgeable about the foster carers' charter and how it is implemented in practice. Foster carers particularly identified with the term 'pushy parent', to gain for the children and young people they foster what they need.

All those working for the agency have the qualifications and experience necessary for the roles they are undertaking. Staff feel well supported through regular supervision, team meetings and relevant training. There has been some delay in the annual appraisal of staff performance, which is being addressed. The resourcing is sufficient for staff to fulfil the agency aims and objectives. Notifications are made as required with any action taken where necessary. The agency is working towards the establishment of a new database in April 2015 which will streamline the recording processes for staff and foster carers. The current combination of hardcopy and electronic systems are cumbersome but records are maintained satisfactorily and enlivened with photographs.

The two requirements and two recommendations arising from the last inspection have been met. Each child or young person placed has a copy of the children's guide, which supervising social workers go through with them where necessary. Managers supervising other staff have received relevant training and have the time to deliver this regularly. Training for foster carers in safe caring practices is in place. Management monitoring of supervision is more robust.

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.