

# Regional Foster Placements (South West)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Heather Chaplin/Sarah Canto
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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	06/07/2011

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Regional Foster Placements is a national independent fostering agency with a number of branches covering England and Wales. Regional Foster Placements (South West) Ltd is one of these branches, and is based at the registered office in Plymouth. This service provides a range of fostering services such as short-term, long-term and emergency care. Parent and baby care is also provided.

There are 35 foster carers in the south west peninsula area, with 44 children placed. The agency also has sub-offices in Brighton, where there are two foster carers with four children placed, and in Bristol, where there are four foster carers with four children placed.

### 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 fostering service is good because the responsible individual, manager and staff place children and young people at the heart of everything they do. A foster carer who had transferred from another agency said, 'I am very impressed – I love their ethos. They always put children first.'

The agency's strengths include promoting good outcomes for children and young people. Young people achieve well in school; in some instances much better than predicted. They lead healthy lifestyles and receive any specialised support required. Young people are fully consulted about every aspect of the service's operation, and

have the opportunity to participate in foster carer training and staff recruitment.

Foster carer recruitment is well organised and effective. Foster carers reflect a variety of backgrounds and ethnic groups, to provide a range of options for children who may be hard to place. Once recruited, foster carers receive good quality training, supervision and support for dedicated, well-qualified staff. They and their children can participate in a wide range of interesting activities and events, as well as ongoing training and development.

The agency has an effective panel who make prompt and safe decisions. Safeguarding is a high priority. Staff and foster carers have sound safeguarding knowledge and understand how to respond if confronted with a child protection situation.

The agency is well managed by an experienced, qualified registered manager. He is very well supported by the responsible individual. Although a national company, the service is still small enough to provide a personal, friendly service. Plans for growth are sustainable and financially sound. Leaders and managers remain fully focused on the children's needs, and understand the importance of consultation and engaging children, foster carers and staff in any changes. Relationships with the police, education services and local authorities are generally very positive.

The regulatory shortfalls found are within safeguarding, which is why this outcome area requires improvement. Staff recruitment is not yet fully robust, but it is safe and there are no risks to children and young people. There has been one situation when an unchecked adult was briefly allowed access to a fostering household, but this was quickly actioned and no harm came to any children and young people. Two requirements have been made.

Two recommendations have been made regarding improvements in developing more assertive relationships with local authorities to secure robust placement planning for children, and further improving the quality of the panel minutes.

## **Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
<p>11: Independent fostering agencies—duty to secure welfare</p> <p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>1. (a) the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that there is clarity in placement planning, and that young people's needs are not compromised by those of other young people in placement (Regulation 11 (1) (a))</p>	07/10/2015
<p>20: Fitness of workers</p> <p>(3) The registered person must ensure that there is full and satisfactory information available in relation to persons working for the fostering service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1.</p> <p>In particular, ensure that for each staff or panel member there is full employment history, a disclosure and barring service certificate for this employment, that identity information is kept on file and that all references are verified. (Regulation 20 (3) (c) and Schedule 1).</p>	07/10/2015

## Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. In particular, ensure that the language and terminology used in the minutes is appropriate for the potential audience, for example foster carers and external agencies (NMS 14.7).
- Ensure that the fostering service follows up with the responsible authority any gaps in the information provided to them on the child or the child's family, which may hinder the foster carer in providing a safe caring environment that meets the child's needs and enables them to keep the child, other children in the fostering household and the foster carer him/herself safe. (NMS 15.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people receive good quality information about their new foster carers before they move in. Foster carers prepare an accessible, well-designed profile with photographs of their family, home and any pets. This helps children to understand what to expect and supports their transition into the foster family.

Children and young people feel safe, secure and confident with their foster carers. The large majority of young people make good progress since arriving in their placements, and have begun to develop positive attachments within their fostering families. Some young people sustain these relationships well beyond the end of their placements. The ability to achieve stable, enduring relationships is crucial to young people's future happiness and life chances.

Foster carers explain how they help very traumatised young people who have previously been victims of exploitation and abuse to develop their self-esteem and confidence. Some young people did so well in this respect, that they were able to return to school and achieve a number of GCSEs.

The agency understands the importance of the care planning process. Most children and young people have sound placement plans, tailored to their individual needs. These are dependent on the quality of information provided by each local authority, and not all are forthcoming with clear, robust plans. The agency does chase missing information, but acknowledges that it could sometimes have been more assertive in doing so. There are signs of improvement in this area.

The service provides good quality information for placing authorities, who praise the level and quality of communication. Currently, the agency does not prepare written reports for care plan reviews, and the foster carers contribute verbally. Discussion took place during the inspection about the importance of the agency demonstrating their commitment to the care planning process, which might include written reports from foster carers.

Children and young people receive very good support with family contact arrangements. When they have to be placed separately from their brothers and sisters, the service helps them to maintain contact and build improved family relationships. The service provides life story work to help children develop and maintain a positive sense of identity. Foster carers are encouraged to help children collect information about their lives which will help them to achieve lasting memories of their time in foster care. This will include collecting and presenting photographs of holidays, special occasions and other activities that children and young people will treasure in later years. Young people receive support from agency staff if they wish

to understand more about their personal histories, or read their file records.

Children and young people are fully involved with the agency's plans and daily work. Consultation groups help young people to participate in staff and panel member recruitment. Their reflections on the interview process have proved invaluable.

Young people, as well as experienced foster carers, are also involved in the Skills to Foster training, and an example of this was observed during the inspection. Young people have numerous opportunities to express their wishes and feelings to the agency, and can raise any concerns with ease. They may also contact advocacy services. Young people spoken to do not feel bullied or discriminated against, but if they did, these issues would be listened to and resolved in a sensitive manner that values their diversity and unique needs.

The agency care for young people whose life circumstances have caused them to take risks with their personal safety. Some young people have a history of going missing and other concerning behaviours. Experienced, sensitive foster carers stay calm and professional under pressure. They support young people to stay safe and act appropriately when they do not. The agency acts swiftly alongside placing authorities to gather relevant information about risky situations and develop strategies to help young people to improve their personal safety.

Foster carers value healthy lifestyles and help their looked after children to eat a balanced, wholesome diet. Children and young people receive effective advice and have access to emotional and psychological support when required. Some members of the staff team are training in counselling, and the service has paid for foster carers to receive dedicated training time from external agencies that teach attachment-based therapeutic parenting skills.

Some children with specific disabilities have settled so well with their foster carers, that they have achieved remarkable improvements in their stability, behaviour and educational attendance and attainment. For example, one child was not attending school at all on arrival in placement and was assessed as working at around the age of eight years. Within a few months of arriving in placement, she is now working at a 14 year old level. Of the three children in this placement, two go to school full time and the third is responding really well to 25 hours per week home tutoring.

The fostering agency supports children's education by providing practical input during school hours. The vast majority of looked after children with this agency are in education, employment or training. This helps to ensure that they improve their life chances and reach their educational potential.

Children and young people are fully included in the foster carers' family life. Any respite care is carefully planned, with the child at the centre of the process. Respite care is offered to help foster carers to rest and have some family time together, but

some choose not to utilise this because they are concerned not to disrupt their fostered child's sometimes fragile attachments. Many young people are able to go on holiday with their foster carers, giving them an experience that they may never before have enjoyed.

Young people are able to see their own friends, have overnight stays and engage in normal social activities appropriate to their age and understanding of risk. Individual foster carers and the agency provide extensive activities and social events for children and young people, to give them the opportunity to meet with each other and have fun.

Foster carers can offer stable, supportive and nurturing placements to children from a range of ethnicities, cultural and religious backgrounds. Some carers have experience of looking after disabled children and those who have specific needs to help them to understand their personal and sexual identity.

Foster carers work very well with parents and the placing authority to help young people work towards phased returns home. For example, young people spend time with their birth families and some respite time with their foster carer, to prepare them for a return home.

Some young people have acquired considerable independence skills. Subject to the local authority's plans, they may stay with their carers until ready to move on. The agency provides considerable help and support for the young people and their carers as the child reaches the later stages of their placement. For example, the service runs a training group for young people and their carers to learn more about working towards independence. This provides a forum for advice and support. The service has developed a detailed life skills book to help fostered young people achieve the skills they need to move on. Staying put arrangements are supported whenever possible, but this is dependent on each placing authority.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The quality of recruitment, training and support for foster carers is one of the agency's strengths, with a clear focus on the children and young people's needs. The agency recruits resilient, experienced foster carers who are able to meet a wide variety of individual need. The agency makes it clear in the statement of purpose that it offers placements to children and young people with complex needs and



challenging behaviour.

In order to sustain placements, the agency provides an exceptionally good level and quality of support. One foster commented, 'my supervising social worker has provided excellent support and help. She has provided me with information and advice to help me with very challenging situations. She has put in place a support structure which has insured the needs of the family are met as well as the needs of the placement.'

Another foster carer said, 'the work is difficult, we manage very challenging young people and can't do it alone. We never feel alone with this service; someone is always there for us.'

Foster carers feel confident in the knowledge and experience of the staff on call. They are available throughout the 24 hour period, 'with someone who knows me and my young people. On-call is no help, if the person from the agency doesn't know you or your children.'

Foster carers commented that they receive support and training in any area that they need; 'we choose courses relevant to the problems that the children have, and so far the courses have been most helpful.' Another foster carer commented that 'the agency have not said 'no' to me yet!'

Foster carers undertake the training, support and development standards as required. Foster carers achieve Training and Development Standards in a year. Training is open to all foster carers and birth families, in particularly first aid training, which has really benefitted children. Foster carers have excellent understanding of behaviour as a result of receiving high-quality training in conscious and therapeutic parenting models.

Foster carers are regarded as valued professionals and their views are at the heart of the service. As far as possible, they are supported to participate in placement planning, and carers are involved in the agency's monthly reports to each placing authority.

The fostering panel is well managed and led. The experienced chairman is a head teacher, and his background in education proves valuable to the panel, enhancing their knowledge base. Foster carers reported a positive experience of the panel, and said that decisions are made in a timely manner.

The panel administrator is very efficient and dynamic, keen to learn further skills and improve practice. He has attended panel administrator training to support him in this challenging job. The quality of the minutes is generally good, but in places they read informally and lack clarity. Under some circumstances, panel minutes may be read by external agencies and the foster carers, so they should reflect appropriate

terminology and style. A recommendation has been made.

The agency employs external assessors to conduct prospective foster carers' assessments. The panel chair confirmed that the quality of Form F reports is generally good. The agency matches children to fostering families very well. Although some foster carers waiting for a placement sometimes become impatient, they usually understand that there may be a good reason why their services are being retained for a child with special needs that they can meet. Careful matching helps the agency to ensure that there are relatively few unplanned placement endings. This has a direct beneficial effect on the children placed with the service.

The agency ensures that children's reviews of their care planning arrangements are conducted at the correct intervals. Reviews may be brought forward if there is a specific need. This helps to ensure that young people do not drift in placement, and that there are always clear objectives in their care plans.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Safeguarding requires improvement because there has been one instance when, for a period of approximately three weeks, an unchecked young adult had overnight stays with his looked-after girlfriend and her baby in a placement where there was another young person in long-term residence. Although no harm came to any of the children and young people, this potentially placed them at risk.

The agency did not have sufficient documentation to construct a clear and robust care plan for the mother and baby. The foster carers live in a second local authority area, and there were delays in achieving clarity about needs and respective agency responsibilities. The baby is mentioned as the subject of the placement plan, but she is not accommodated. There is insufficient detail about whether, or how, the foster carers will look after the baby. There is no clear expectation of what the parents should be doing and no written agreement between the various parties. The delay in taking effective action to clarify arrangements and ensure that the young people were safeguarded could have had an impact on the baby, fostered child and the baby's mother.

During the course of the inspection, the responsible individual and registered manager recognised that the focus on the mother and baby's needs could be detrimental to the other young person in the placement. In order to keep all parties safe, they decided to give notice on the mother and baby placement, to keep both children safe. The service acknowledges that there was insufficient challenge to the local authorities to establish clear plans.

When child protection concerns arise, the service consults with local area designated officers and notifies all other agencies appropriately. Apart from the example outlined

above, the service generally has very strong and supportive relationships with placing authorities and other agencies, such as the police and education services.

The agency has a generally effective system of staff and panel member recruitment. However, the staff and panel members' files do not always contain all the information required by Schedule 1 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. Specifically, there are several examples of gaps in employment history, most of which were resolved during the course of the inspection. Although the large majority of references have been verified in considerable detail, one panel member's references had not been verified. Identity information is not always kept on file, and one panel member has a Disclosure and Barring Service certificate from previous employment, which is not transferable. A requirement has been made.

The agency looks after young people with very complex needs, and consequently, some do go missing. Such incidents are well documented, and the agency is extremely mindful of the risks posed to young people whose whereabouts is unknown.

The agency places safeguarding at the heart of its practice, and young people said that they feel safe and well cared for. Staff and foster carers receive very good quality training in child protection, and know what to do to keep children safe.

Foster carers are well trained and extremely sensitive about the impact of abuse and neglect on children. This high level of insight is shown in their daily log recordings, which sometimes form part of the agency's safeguarding notifications to Ofsted.

The agency has very good relationships with local authorities, and liaises well with the local authority designated officers for the geographical areas covered.

Social workers provide good supervision and challenge to carers and help them see bigger picture.

Recruitment of foster carers and the assessments is sound, with safeguarding at the centre of practice. Several social work team members have specific training and experience in child protection, which helps to focus the service on safeguarding as a priority.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The service is led by an experienced, qualified and registered social worker, who, prior to his management role, had been employed by the service for the past 10 years. He became the registered manager on 23 December 2013.

The manager is working towards his level 5 award in leadership and management, which he estimates to be 80% complete. The agency is currently reviewing the location and function of its southern and south-west offices. Since the manager was registered, the management arrangements for this expanding service have become stretched. The geographical spread of foster carers and the southern and south-west England sub-offices has resulted in logistical difficulties, particularly for the registered manager, who has to drive between Plymouth, Chippenham and Brighton. The registered manager and responsible individual explained that the service plans to submit an application to Ofsted to register the sub-office in Brighton as a branch, with its own registered manager. As the agency is already acting in this regard, no requirement has been made.

The agency's statement of purpose meets regulatory requirements. The document is easy to understand and is published on the agency's website. Since the previous inspection, the agency has adopted the Foster Carers' Charter to help promote good practice. The agency operates with an open and transparent model of communication, which ensures that if any concerns are raised, these are welcomed and help to inform future practice. The agency produces good quality, easily readable children's guides to help young people to understand the services offered.

Leaders and managers develop and sustain good quality working relationships with placing authorities and other agencies. When care or transition planning information is incomplete, leaders and managers challenge deficits in information. The manager gave a number of examples where missing information had been obtained effectively. One example was found the agency had not been sufficiently assertive, and the lack of clarity about the respective roles and responsibilities of the two local authorities involved had been reproduced in the agency's care plan. This matter also had safeguarding implications and is covered by the requirement made under Regulation 11.

The service is ambitious for children and young people, and has grown steadily since the previous inspection. This expansion has been sustainable and as a result, the agency remains financially viable and it has been possible to remain fully focused on delivering good outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers drive and monitor the service effectively, and identify any areas for improvement. Foster carers, staff and young people are consulted about their perceptions of the service, and managers act on this information. The service submits annual quality and data returns to Ofsted, to record service monitoring and help inform the inspection process.

The agency responded positively to the requirement and the recommendations from the previous inspection, and consequently all have been met. The requirement concerned notifications to Ofsted. The service now submits notifications to the relevant agencies when necessary, and exercises good judgement in this regard. When further information is required, the agency cooperates fully with Ofsted and provides updates to notifications to complete the information.

The first recommendation concerned the need for a development plan. The manager explained that this is now in place, and that the plan has been constructed through consultation with foster carers and staff. There are plans to involve children in this consultation in future. The development objectives include the team's and foster carers' training needs, the introduction of the conscious parenting model and foster carer recruitment and growth.

A second recommendation was made to ensure that child protection training captures wider safeguarding processes. Since the previous inspection, the agency has worked hard to improve the quality of its safeguarding training. After initial training online, staff and many of the foster carers now receive local authority face-to-face training through the Local Safeguarding Children Board. This ensures that participants have the opportunity to ask questions, and that the training provided reflects the latest research and current thinking in child safeguarding.

The agency has also addressed the third recommendation, which was to create a learning and development plan for staff. There is now a staff learning and development programme, linked to the team development plan described above. The manager and staff are currently developing a new training programme, which includes online and face-to-face options to suit a range of individual learning needs. Some foster carers have mentioned in their agency survey responses that they have an 80-mile round trip to attend some of the training. The agency is working on ways to make training accessible for all, and developing the Brighton sub-office as a branch is part of that plan.

The south west branch of the fostering agency has premises in Plymouth, which have served their purpose for many years. Due to the age and layout of the period building, they do not provide fully accessible, comfortable, quality accommodation for the staff and the fostering panel. This does not have a negative impact on fostering families with children, because their activities take place in suitable premises in their local areas, but it may affect prospective and approved foster carers attending panel meetings. These meetings take place in the basement, which is also used for storage, is accessed by stairs and has almost no natural light. Some panel members commented on the quality of their meeting room.

There has been some resistance to moving premises, as the present building is convenient for staff and the service wants to focus its funds on providing services for children and foster carers. However, the responsible individual and registered

manager are now considering a planned move to more comfortable surroundings that better support the agency's business needs. This action demonstrates that Leaders and managers listen to feedback from families and take appropriate action.

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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.