

# Families First Fostering Limited

Families First Fostering Limited

7D Whitebridge Estate, Whitebridge Lane, Stone, Staffordshire ST15 8LQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

A small private company owns this independent fostering agency. Ofsted registered the agency in May 2020. The provider aims to provide high-quality therapeutically informed care where each child will have the opportunity for stability, security and a warm, safe caring environment.

The registered manager has a level 5 qualification in leadership and management.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

### Inspection dates: 7 to 11 March 2022

**Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account** **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

**Date of last inspection:** not previously inspected

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** not applicable

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children enjoy warm and nurturing relationships with their foster families. They feel welcomed and included in the wider foster family. Children make significant progress, and their lives are enhanced by the care and nurture that their fostering families provide. Some children have lived with their foster families for a significant period, which reinforces their sense of belonging. A child told the inspector, 'I give them [foster carers] 100 out of 100. They are the best. I like the agency because they take us on fun trips.'

All children attend school regularly and their attendance rates are excellent. Foster carers, staff and teachers work together to overcome barriers to children's learning. This partnership working contributes to children's strong academic and social progress.

A therapist is employed by the agency. They work closely with foster carers to ensure that the foster carers understand children's needs and provide appropriate and therapeutically informed care. Foster carers benefit from regular therapy-led forums and individual consultations. This specialist oversight means that children receive good-quality and well-informed care.

Staff and foster carers understand the importance of children spending time with family and friends. When appropriate, staff and foster carers advocate strongly on behalf of children so that they get to spend time with those who are important to them. On other occasions, foster carers invite children's family members to the foster home to celebrate special occasions. This inclusive approach helps children to feel settled and valued while enhancing their family relationships.

Foster carers and staff enthusiastically support children to engage in a range of positive social and recreational activities. For example, children enjoy trips to theme parks and the zoo. In addition, foster carers promote children's interests and talents. For example, one child who has a keen interest in the arts and dance is due to attend an audition for the National Youth Theatre. These positive experiences build children's self-esteem and provide them with a lasting legacy of achievement.

Children have regular opportunities to express their views about the quality of care they receive. For example, children take part in regular forums and have access to external advocacy support. Staff take children's views seriously and use this feedback to make changes to their care. In addition, children work alongside panel members during the recruitment of prospective foster carers. This inclusive approach makes children feel valued.

Children are encouraged to develop independence skills. This is an area of practice that is continuing to develop within the agency. For example, some children now benefit from bespoke support to develop important life skills. The agency's 'family feel' ethos endures when children leave their foster families. For example, foster

carers maintain regular contact with children and continue to provide them with practical and emotional help.

Overall, children's health needs are met. Staff ensure that individual and detailed health assessments are in place. Children attend regular appointments at the dentist, general practitioner and optician. When necessary, foster carers seek additional support from specialist agencies. However, in one instance, a foster carer did not provide therapeutically informed care when a child expressed concerns about their health and well-being. This was a missed opportunity to reassure the child and to provide care in line with their needs.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: good**

The registered manager has established a proactive safeguarding culture. Staff are very responsive when safeguarding concerns arise. They work proactively with safeguarding agencies to manage risks. The registered manager provides intensive oversight of these multi-agency responses. When necessary, support staff provide foster carers and children with additional activities and respite care to help manage periods of crisis. This proactive and child-centred approach plays an important role in stabilising foster families at times of need. A foster carer told the inspector, 'Nothing is too much for them [staff]. I know I only need to ask and they will help. You never feel alone. They are there when we need them.'

Children are safe and settled. They do not go missing from care. Staff do not become complacent and they continually promote a safeguarding culture. For example, foster carers receive training in a range of areas such as behaviour management, online safety and child exploitation. This variety of training provides foster carers with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage risks.

In most cases, foster carers use their intuition and therapeutically informed care to skilfully support children when needed to keep them safe. However, on one occasion, staff missed an opportunity to provide a child with additional support following a significant incident and after initial steps had been taken to ensure children's safety.

The registered manager has established strong links with the local safeguarding partnership board and a range of local authority designated officers. She uses these links to provide staff and foster carers with specialist safeguarding training. For example, the police recently provided training in relation to child exploitation.

Children's care and safeguarding practice continue to develop and evolve. This is due to the proactive and determined approach of the registered manager and staff. For example, the registered manager completes research projects to review the impact of foster carer support networks. She has used this learning to establish mentoring and empathic listener support schemes in the agency. As a result, foster carers feel able to discuss and make sense of challenges in a safe, relaxed and well-informed environment.

This innovative ethos inspires staff and foster carers to continually develop their practice. For example, an agency social worker worked alongside specialist health professionals to develop and adapt safer care plans for infant children. In addition, foster carers continually use research to enhance their knowledge of therapeutic parenting. They use this specialist knowledge to create individual strategies for children. This attention to detail means that children are kept safe and benefit from exceptionally well-informed care. This research-informed practice is outstanding.

Staff support and encourage children to take age-appropriate risks. For example, staff support children to enjoy friendships while balancing and managing potential risks. Staff involve children in discussions about their safety and agree joint plans to keep them safe. This inclusive approach helps children to build key independence skills in a safe and controlled environment.

Staff actively promote safe care and make at least one unannounced visit to each foster carer annually. Children can speak with trusted staff without their foster carers being present. They also provide feedback about their foster carers for their annual reviews. Consequently, children feel safe and heard.

Foster carers and staff continually promote and celebrate children's positive behaviour. The smallest achievements are rewarded and celebrated. Foster carers use their therapeutic skills to provide calm and insightful care. There have been no incidents of restraint during this inspection period. This is an indication of how settled children feel.

Recruitment of staff and panel members is robust. All appropriate checks are made as part of the initial application, including the applicant's previous work experience and any gaps in their employment. Appropriate references are obtained and verified, and criminal record checks undertaken. Foster carer recruitment is equally robust. All required checks are completed prior to the application being presented to the fostering panel. Staff provide children with opportunities to scrutinise new employees as part of the recruitment process.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The registered manager and the responsible individual are highly experienced and qualified social care professionals with significant experience in fostering services. The registered manager has continued to embed a culture of high aspiration. She is ambitious and child-centred and aspires to provide children with high-quality care.

The registered manager has effective monitoring systems. She carries out frequent quality assurance activities and tracks children's progress closely. Children are provided with frequent opportunities to provide verbal and written feedback about their experiences. The registered manager scrutinises this feedback as part of her monitoring systems and uses it to continually improve children's care. The registered manager knows the strengths and areas for development of the agency. She has plans in place to enhance the quality of children's care.

Staff feel valued and supported. They benefit from a strong training programme and development opportunities. The agency's social workers benefit from a small and manageable caseload. They use this as an opportunity to provide foster carers and children with robust and well-informed support. Foster carers, staff and leaders complete training together. This further enhances the 'family feel' of the agency and promotes consistent care. An agency social worker told the inspector, 'We train together. This makes it much more joined-up. We are a very reflective group. There is a lot of healthy challenge.'

The agency exudes a 'family feel' where all staff, including the registered manager and the responsible individual, know the foster carers and children well. This positive and highly nurturing ethos sets the foundation for children's strong progress. Children are well supported by their foster carers and the agency. Foster carers provide children with nurturing, high-quality care, structure and routine. The staff, foster carers and the children share a strong sense of belonging. However, this good work is not always captured in foster carer's records. For example, one foster carer's records were incomplete and did not reflect the therapeutic ethos of the agency.

The functioning of the panel is a strength of the agency. The panel chair has extensive experience in fostering and is clear about the role of the panel. The panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work that is presented at panel meetings. The quality of foster carers' assessments presented at the panel is of a strong standard. The panel also carries out an effective quality assurance role to provide additional scrutiny of staff practice and the agency's overall performance.

Staff have strong and effective working relationships with a range of external agencies. Staff use these relationships to challenge local authorities effectively, when necessary, in the best interests of children. Feedback provided by professionals during the inspection was unanimously positive. A social worker told the inspector, 'The communication between the agency and the local authority to plan her [the child's] transition was excellent. They [the agency] go above and beyond.' However, on one occasion, the registered manager did not inform Ofsted of a significant incident involving a child. This prevented the regulator from providing additional oversight of this incident.

The quality of the relationships between foster carers and staff is a strength of the agency. This is because of the high level of ongoing formal and informal support that foster carers receive. For example, staff provide foster carers with good-quality, relevant training. Overall, foster carers receive good-quality supervision. However, in one instance the supervision session did not reflect the actions agreed at children's local authority review meetings. This means that children's care may not be fully joined-up. In addition, staff missed opportunities in supervision sessions to address concerns in relation to a foster carer's practice.

The quality of assessments of prospective foster carers is good. Staff provide good analysis of the applicant's strengths and vulnerabilities. Staff use their in-depth knowledge of foster carers to inform placement decisions. As a result, they are very careful to match children to foster carers who can meet their assessed needs.

However, this good practice is not always reflected in the quality of the matching records. For example, some records do not fully explore why foster carers and children are a good match.

## What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))</p> <p>In particular, the provider must ensure that all notifications identified in Schedule 7 of the regulations relating to significant incidents are reported to Ofsted without delay.</p>	<p>30 April 2022</p>

### Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children are provided with opportunities to engage in additional support in line with their needs. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 2.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers provide children with therapeutic care in line with the agency's statement of purpose. This specifically relates to instances when children report concerns about their well-being. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 2.3)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' supervision records acknowledge and address the actions agreed at children's local authority reviews. In addition, foster carers' supervisions will clearly record shortfalls in practice and the steps taken to address these shortfalls. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers' records are detailed and reflect the therapeutic ethos of the agency. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.5)

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.



## Independent fostering agency details

**Unique reference number:** 2573764

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## Inspector

Gareth Leckey, Social Care Inspector

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