

# Future Families (West Midlands)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

This small fostering agency recruits, trains and supports a broad range of carers who provide both short and long-term foster placements for children and young people. The wide range of carers provide placements that reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of the West Midlands. Currently there are 23 households with 32 carers looking after 21 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: **Good**

At the last inspection in 2012, this agency was operating at a good standard. This has been maintained. Since then there have been two registered managers and another is currently being registered with Ofsted. These changes were out of the control of the agency and have caused some disruption. They have been addressed well and had minimal impact on carers although the assessment of new carers has been low. The performance of the service compares favourably to other fostering agencies. Carers are extremely positive about the agency and keep children safe. The overall management of the service is good and the new manager has incorporated herself into the service well. She is fully supported by an independent reviewing social worker and an active responsible individual.

Children continue to make good progress in stable placements. They get on well with their new families, feel integrated and safe. The positive relationships between carers and children are often maintained after children leave. Progress is evident in all areas as children take advantage of the many opportunities available to them. Social

workers consider that carers have a good insight into the needs of children who are looked after. The new manager is implementing various improvements, some of which are aiming to demonstrate the progress made by children more clearly.

The needs and views of children are reflected very well in the day-to-day operation of the service. Their views are evident in the way the service works as well as in their own care. A high standard of matching is achieved that demonstrates the multi-cultural nature of the service and its promotion of social diversity. The agency provides the additional resources necessary for each child including a therapist and a family support worker.

Four recommendations are made at this inspection, which mainly reflect the fact that the new manager has not yet had time to implement her development plan. Particular attention is required to the secure storage of information as the service converts to an electronic system. The personal development of carers also requires attention. Safeguarding procedures are strong but the checks on individuals from overseas requires attention earlier in the recruitment process.

## **Areas of improvement**

### **Recommendations**

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

Ensure that, unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding (NMS 11.3)

Complete a record of the recruitment and suitability checks for foster carers and those working for the service, including checks to confirm the right to work in the UK (NMS 19.3(e))

Ensure that foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. This is with particular regard to each carer having a development plan (NMS 20.5)

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)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

One child represented the views of most when he said, 'I have a very lovely time with my carer. She always makes me laugh. She's a friend, like a mum.' The vast majority of children have good experiences with their carers and know that their views are heard both in their new homes and by the agency. Especially close attention is given to matching new children with carers. As a result, the religious and cultural needs of children are met very well because the agency benefits from a particularly diverse group of carers. Children are pleased with the relationships they establish with carers and their families and few children experience disruptions to their placements. The low level of placement breakdowns compares favourably with other fostering agencies and provides children with the stability they need.

Social workers talk about the 'vast improvements' they see in their children, for example in their speech and educational progress. Nearly all the children attend school regularly and are supported to achieve as well as possible. Very few have experienced changes of school due to difficulties in their foster placements. This is an important contribution to their social and emotional development. Children have good experiences at school, including achieving university placements, getting an educational award from the mayor, and simply receiving a positive report for the first time. Any obstacles to their progress are identified promptly and addressed effectively, using expert advice when required. Overall, there is a low level of risk-taking activity and children engage in a wide range of community activities.

Children see their carers acting cooperatively with their parents, which provides positive role-modelling and sustains their relationships with their families. Contact with their siblings and parents is organised well with carers making the situation as normal as possible. Previous difficulties are repaired, wherever possible. One social worker said, 'Carers offer good insight into the children's needs and the dynamics within their relationships. This has helped children's resilience and developmental needs.' Carers report that their foster children are making good emotional progress because, for example, they are less angry or, in one case, because the child has simply learnt to wear his glasses regularly. For many children this means they are now able to enjoy and benefit from routine opportunities, such as joining local sports clubs and going out for meals. Children benefit from involvement in celebrations, such as those occurring at Christmas. Many recently attended a pantomime arranged by the agency. One carer said, 'My foster child spent two hours totally enthralled – shouting and singing along – it was great to see!'

All children receive a high degree of permanency in their placements, often with their brothers and sisters. Several older children have the security of remaining in placement until after their eighteenth birthdays. This is an important contribution to their futures.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Commissioners, social workers and other professionals are largely positive about this agency. One social worker said, 'This agency is making an important difference at a grass roots level and is highly regarded in the region.' Another said, 'My young person has settled in and is going very well. The carers are loving and secure even during difficult patches. They always try to make things better for him.' The service itself is resilient in the face of challenges, such as the changes of manager. Carers acknowledge this and benefit from a high level of support. One said, 'I enjoy being part of this agency. It is very family orientated, personal and friendly. We always feel welcomed and cared for.' The vast majority of carers live within 50 miles of the office and identify strongly with the service and its aims. The turnover of carers is low and they provide a high rate of permanent and long-term placements.

There has been a net decrease in carers and placements in the last two years. The low rate of recruitment of new carers reflects the lack of managerial capacity to coordinate the work. The new manager is refining the recruitment and assessment procedures to ensure they are as efficient as possible. In a very small number of cases, some basic checks were not completed at an early stage in the process. This was time consuming for applicants and the service but did not affect children. Recent changes to the recruitment processes have now addressed these shortfalls. Panel members note an improvement in the quality of written assessments coming before them. Since the last inspection, the independent review mechanism has been used once. It served to confirm that in most regards the agency uses robust recruitment processes for new carers.

The matching of new children with carers is undertaken thoroughly. Carers have confidence in the process because, they say, 'the staff know us well'. Staff take pride in completing the process carefully, which is justified by the longevity of most placements. Although there was a slight increase in the number of unplanned placement endings last year, the rate is still 33 per cent lower than the national average. In addition, all such endings occurred over at least 24 hours to facilitate as smooth a transition as possible. This is an important contribution to children's welfare. Children are given information about carers in advance. However, not all households have such information in a format appropriate to the children's age and understanding. This means that children's anxieties are not allayed as well as possible prior to placement.

In other ways too, carers are supported well. They receive regular announced and unannounced visits but also know that support is available at all times of day and night. This is an important contribution to the loyalty carers feel towards the agency. There are regular activities, such as parties and outings, which carers and foster children appreciate greatly. Carer's own children are included in such occasions and supervising social workers consult them on a regular basis. This serves to cement their critical role in fostering households. One child was pleased to receive an award recently for drawing the Christmas card the agency will use this year. Photographs in the office celebrate children's events and successes. Carer's annual reviews benefit

from being chaired by an independent person. These reviews are another area in which improvements have occurred have been made. Reviews now occur in a timely way with all the required information in place. Supervising social workers are strong advocates for their carers, particularly with placing authorities with whom they sustain effective working relationships. They have helped to ensure, for example, that new social workers are allocated to children, that education arrangements are meeting children's needs and rights, and that family contact arrangements run smoothly. This is vital support for carers and allows them to focus on their child-care responsibilities. Carers have their own meetings, which are facilitated by staff. The programme is based on topics of concern to carers, such as tax issues and carers' emotional health.

A family support worker is in post and provides excellent support to carers and children. This occurs in a variety of ways, ranging from direct work with children to compiling a newsletter for them that meets their wishes. The support worker is also an invaluable conduit for children's views about their care and the agency, especially the more difficult to engage teenagers. Useful work also occurs in the training and support of the sons and daughters of carers so they understand how to keep themselves safe.

Staff and carers use children's placement plans to direct the care they provide. Both children and their carers contribute to the reviews. Work is underway to track children's progress more accurately so that the efforts of carers are as effective as possible. Carers are clear about the amount and type of authority that the placing authorities have delegated to them. This helps children live as normally as possible.

Carers also benefit from a good training programme. From this, they understand why children behave in negative ways. Since the last inspection, input from a therapist has improved this markedly. As a result, carers are gradually implementing a theoretical model of care that helps children feel safe. This model is now being used in direct work with carers, who are excited by the additional insight and strategies it provides. Carers now attain the national induction standards in a timely way. This was a shortfall at the last inspection and shows substantial progress. However, the achievement of a prescribed amount of training and personal development by each carer every year is widely discussed but not sufficiently well implemented. Carers do not have individualised development plans and therefore their personal objectives are not sufficiently clear. As a result, it is not evident that each carer's skills and competencies are improving as necessary.

The agency fostering panel is organised well. It routinely uses its specialist members to full effect, for example regarding legal and health issues. The skills of panel members are kept up-to-date and are re-assessed at least annually. The wide-ranging expertise of panel members is used valuably in the review of every carer every year, which is a higher level of involvement than in many other agencies. The recommendations of panel to the decision maker are recorded clearly and, in addition to the terms of approval for new carers, define the preferences that pertain to each household. This is useful guidance to the agency, which contributes to the effective matching of children with carers. The decision maker does not always agree with the panel's recommendations, as is her right. This contributes to healthy

discussions within the agency. Carers inevitably find panel meetings somewhat challenging. Consideration is therefore being given to sharing more information about panel members with them prior to the meetings. The service aims to improve whenever it can.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children receive a high level of protection and feel safe in their placements. Carers and staff understand the hazards to which children are exposed. They address these appropriately while also allowing children to receive age-appropriate experiences. New staff are subject to a robust recruitment procedure in which any issues of concern are carefully investigated. In individual households, as well as the office, hazards and potential risks are recorded and addressed well. This standard has been sustained during the managerial changes.

Members of staff routinely see children alone. This serves to confirm that they are safe and feel safe. The team members have a good understanding of safeguarding procedures and challenge placing authorities when there are shortfalls in their visits or timely provision of information. They are aware of issues such as female genital mutilation and the implications for looked after children of radicalisation. Supervising social workers help carers to devise appropriate behaviour management plans for each child, where needed. These are kept under review and involve children. This means that children participate in planning their own progress. A small number are unable to contribute because of learning difficulties or their age and this is taken into account. Very few require physical support because of their behavioural issues. The manager has recently reviewed and updated the procedures pertaining to the management of children and there is now a clear emphasis on reward, reparation and restitution. The assessment process for risk and guidance to staff is off a high standard.

No children are currently at risk of sexual exploitation or going missing. This percentage has varied since the last inspection. In two instances where children could not be kept safe, the agency liaised with other professionals to amend strategies and ultimately find placements that were more appropriate. One child has kept in touch with her carers, which demonstrates the meaningful relationship that she established with them. External agencies, including Ofsted, are notified as required. Any allegations against carers are investigated by the local authorities and in a very small number of cases, children have been moved as a result. Where appropriate, staff endeavour to sustain or reorganise the relationships between carers and children who have left so the breakdown causes as little damage as possible.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency is led well. The responsible individual reported that the agency is financially sound and she is looking forward to a period of expansion. She considers that the current model is effective and true to its principles, such as valuing and reflecting the local cultural diversity and helping children recover from traumatic experiences.

A series of unfortunate, random events, including serious illness, has contrived to disrupt the management of the service over the past few years. However, the leadership provided by the responsible individual, plus appropriate deputising arrangements, have sustained the service to children and carers. The social work team is very experienced, has a shared vision for the service and has a good degree of continuity; one member was the original registered manager. The shortfalls identified at the last inspection have been implemented. As a result, there is better attention to the arrangements for children who wish to remain in their foster placements when they are 18. The safety of children has been improved by closer attention to regular, unannounced visit to carers. Similarly, improvements have been made to children's behavioural plans and carers' induction training, as indicated above. The new manager is well qualified and highly experienced. Her application to become registered is being processed by Ofsted. She has successfully engaged the carers and team members. Team members feel she is accelerating the rate of improvement. One said, 'The new manager knows where she's going and she's taking us with her.'

The manager has completed a thorough and accurate analysis of the service and embarked on a development programme. Adequate monitoring processes are in use. Information about the quality of the service is gleaned from a variety of sources and action plans are prioritised accordingly. This systematic approach has already led to several improvements. A small number of complaints have been made about the service. Complaints are processed appropriately and lessons integrated into practice. One complaint has led to an improvement in paperwork and another to supervising social workers receiving additional training on report writing.

Record keeping is not as robust as necessary. This is partly caused by the current change from a paper-based system to an electronic one, and partly by a weak policy. Document dating and other protocol are not being followed on electronic files, security is compromised by documents not being made tamper proof, and logs are not sufficiently well protected. This compromises the capacity of the system to support practitioners and managers. It also jeopardises the records that are available to children in the future. A new office administrator is due to begin work imminently and has already been tasked with this issue.

Clear lines of supervision are in place for staff. Staff are supported well both formally and informally and have a pleasant working environment. The reasonable size of their caseloads mean they provide carers with substantial support and take pride in their work. Training events keep them up-to-date with developments within the social work and fostering fields. In keeping with the planned expansion of the service, the social workers are booked onto training in the assessment of new carers.

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## 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.