

Synergy Fostering Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Peter Daniel
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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Synergy Fostering is an independent fostering service, in operation since May 2000. The primary role of the agency is to recruit, approve and support foster carers for looked after children needing substitute family care. The agency states that it is dedicated to providing safe and nurturing foster placements through their culturally diverse carers. Synergy Fostering is a private limited company with three directors. The premises are offices, located in a commercial building near London Bridge Station. At July 2007, there were approximately 19 approved fostering households and 15 children placed.

Summary

Synergy is a small, friendly fostering agency. It has intimate knowledge of its foster carers and provides them with excellent support and training opportunities. Through its staff, the fostering panel and the two independent assessors, Synergy is taking seriously its role of monitoring and achieving good standards of practice towards meeting outcomes for children. The agency has had difficulty in recruiting to a vacant post of Supervising Social Worker but immediately following the inspection the post was filled.

The overall quality rating is good.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The previous inspection required the agency to develop a strategy to ensure the assessment and approval of foster carers is sufficiently robust to protect children. The agency's problems were mainly due to the fact that there was only one Supervising Social Worker within the agency (the other being vacant), which put pressure on assessment, recruitment and support functions. It is therefore positive to report that the agency has now recruited a qualified worker to the vacant post. The knock on effect will be to enhance the service in terms of supervising, supporting and assessing foster carers. Furthermore the agency should no longer have a conflict of role on the fostering panel where panel members were sitting on the panel but also presenting assessments.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Synergy promotes the health and development of children in placement to a good standard. Each child and young person is receiving appropriate health care which meets his/her needs. Children are registered with a general practitioner, dentist and optician. Medical, dental, optician's and hospital appointments are being kept. Immunisations of children had been done and are up to date. Foster carers are promoting healthy living and providing a healthy, balanced diet. Foster carers are talking to young people about matters health matters including safe sex.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency understands the task in respect of safeguarding children. There are robust practices for the recruitment of staff and foster carers. Foster carer's files and cases tracked showed that Criminal Record Bureau checks had been done and were up to date. The checks had included

partners and relatives of foster carers, employer references, Local Authority references and personal references. The agency gave assurances that they would not place a child where the carer did not have an up to date Criminal Record check and it has a system for flagging up renewal of Criminal Record checks before the expiry date. Staff file checks were not done on this occasion as there had been no new appointments since the last inspection. The agency has a Safe Care Policy which foster carers adhere to. The agency also has a Child Protection Policy. It was noted that child protection procedures should be updated to spell out guidelines to be followed when there has been an allegation that a child has been abused. The agency ensures that foster carers provide a safe, healthy and nurturing environment. The foster homes visited by the inspector were suitably comfortable and homely to meet the needs of children. Health and safety checks are undertaken annually as part of each foster carer's annual review. The agency provides training in matters of child protection and safeguarding children. The fostering panel was inspected as part of its safeguarding role and quality assurance function. Its role is discussed below in detail under Organisation. Since the last inspection, the agency has taken seriously the need to safeguard children and the fostering panel has acted robustly to screen out less competent foster carers. It has de-registered two foster carers for failing to meet standards. Files showed safe care assessments on children/young people had been undertaken. Two Independent Reviewing Officers additionally provide a quality assurance function. Their role is to carry out annual reviews of foster carers. One of the independent reviewing officers commented 'the agency's practice is sound and they strive very hard. They know their foster carers. They are child focussed and support the foster carers'. Foster carers have attended training on child protection and safeguarding.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering agency promotes educational achievement and encourages children to develop their potential. Foster carers are supporting young people in their education by liaising with schools, colleges and universities. Children and young people are encouraged and helped with their homework, as appropriate. Young people take part in a range of activities including shopping, attending libraries, participating in sporting activities, visiting museums, going to the park, cinema, attending libraries and going out for meals. Children and young people attend their own Looked After reviews when they have the opportunity to represent themselves and convey their wishes and feelings. Children and young people in placement are given information on how to complain and are knowledgeable about the process. There were examples of the fostering agency valuing diversity and foster carers providing ethnically sensitive food. Young people were interviewed and expressed complete satisfaction with the care offered in their placement.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Synergy makes sure that each child or young person in foster care is encouraged to maintain and develop family contacts and friendships. The agency has guidance and policy on promoting and managing contact. Foster carers are facilitating direct and indirect contact with birth parents and relatives, including escorting children to meet relatives at contact centres. The fostering service also promotes consultation and ensures that the opinions and views of children are heard. Children and young people attend their own Looked After review and are expected to complete a consultation form for the meeting. The Supervising Social Worker makes a point of

seeing the child/young person individually at least once every three months, including during the unannounced visit. Interviews with children are recorded on the child record form. Additionally, when children are first accommodated, they receive a Children's Pack which gives information about the agency. Interviews with young people confirmed that they are familiar with the procedures for raising a concern or making a complaint. They had been given a leaflet on how to make a complaint. Young people said that they would speak with their social worker first before making a complaint. They were aware of independent organisations such as VOICE and Childline.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Synergy encourages young people towards independence. Foster carers help young people develop skills, competence and knowledge for independent living and adulthood. There were examples, confirmed by the young people themselves, of foster carers offering support with budgeting, shopping, preparing meals, doing laundry, opening a bank account and writing curriculum vitae's and college and job applications. Young people were being referred to Connexions for career's advice and vocational training. Foster carers were contributing to the Pathway Plan. The policy of the agency is to put £10 a week savings for each child/ young person.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Synergy is a small fostering agency with 19 carers and 15 children in placement. The service is managed by those with appropriate skills and experience. The organisation consists of a Registered Provider who has a CQSW qualification and is currently undertaking the NVQ level 4 in Management training; a Responsible Individual who has a Diploma in Social Work Qualification and is also undertaking the NVQ level 4 in Management Training; a Commercial Director; a Registered Manager who has a Diploma in Social Work; and two Supervising Social Workers - one recently appointed Supervising Social Worker is qualified, the other has a GNVQ Health and Social Care level 3 qualification and an NVQ level 2 in Child Care (but does not have a social work qualification and is not GSCC registered). The agency also has one full time administrative staff member and a book keeper who works one day a week. The agency also deploys two Independent Reviewing Officers and uses external assessors to undertake some assessments of foster carers. The agency has until recently experienced difficulties retaining staff and had at the time of the inspection been operating with a vacant Supervising Social Work post. Given that the agency is small, the situation had impacted on the service and the Registered Manager was having to undertake the duties of supporting carers and doing assessments. The newly appointed Supervising Social Worker has now resolved the situation. The agency is a fair and competent employer. The agency's recruitment practices were not assessed on this occasion but the standard was met at the last inspection. Staff receive regular supervision i.e. every four-six weeks and Team meetings are held three weekly. Management meetings are held monthly or according to necessity. Foster carers are well supported by the agency and receive regular visits, including formal supervision. Visits to foster carers take place every four to five weeks and the agency is also in regular telephone contact. The agency has managed to maintain its support to foster carers in spite of its vacancy problem. The service operates an out of hours duty system. It also supports its foster carers through running support groups that are generally well attended. The agency has a good quality training programme

and gives priority to training its foster carers. New carers have to attend mandatory 'skills to fostering' training'. Eight or nine foster carers have completed NVQ level training at a local college and two more foster carers have been referred to undertake the training. Additionally, during the past year the agency has provided other in-house training as follows:- Allegations against carers, bereavement, recording, preparing young people towards adulthood, supervision of carers, ADHD. Foster carers report that they are satisfied with the training programme. As an incentive, foster carers have to attend 80% of training every year in order to receive their annual increment. Not all of the foster carers have attended all of the training. The inspection included attendance at the fostering panel. Membership includes the Responsible Individual, the agency's Team Manager, a foster carer, an ex-care leaver, a Drug and Assessment Worker, a Nursery Officer and a manager from a Youth Offending Team. The panel does not have a member with direct health background e.g. a nurse or health visitor but has a medical adviser. The panel is well organised and the chair provides good chairing skills. The quality of reports and information written is to a good standard. Members had read the papers beforehand and prepared questions in advance. The panel had also received good information about the outcome of foster carer's annual reviews. The members demonstrate robust questioning and are clearly setting high standards for the agency's foster carers. The panel provides a good quality assurance function, monitoring and reviewing the work of the assessors and ensuring a consistency of approach in assessment across the service. It was noted that the agency is 'weeding out' less competent carers. One problem observed is that fostering panel sometimes is faced with a conflict of roles amongst its members - it has meant that a panel member has sometimes been in the position of presenting a case to panel and therefore having their work evaluated by the same panel. In order to avoid this, the agency is considering using only external assessors to undertake assessments. It was further noted that some annual reviews are being assessed by the panel some weeks following the review date. The premises used by the fostering service is suitable for the purpose. Administrative records are maintained as required and files are generally in good order. Children's files did not have a separate section for 'education' and 'health' and some of the details had been stored under general correspondence. The fostering service is financially viable.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
17	Ensure that sufficient qualified staff are deployed and retained, who have the qualifications, skills and experience necessary to the work of the fostering agency- Regulation 19 (a) and (b)	31 October 2007
9	ensure the agency's procedures on safeguarding children are updated and include guidelines to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect (Regulation 12 (1) (a) and (b).The guidelines should be explained clearly and appropriately to the child -Standard 9.	30 November 2007

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that one of the independent members of the fostering panel has expertise in child health
- ensure the fostering panel provides a quality assurance function and that there is no conflict of roles between membership of the panel and those who undertake assessments of foster carers (Standard 30.5).
- ensure that the foster panel receives information about the outcome of foster carer's reviews in a timely fashion to avoid delay (Standard 30.6)
- ensure that children's files have a separate section for 'education' and 'health' and include a child/young person's health care plan. Some of the details had been stored under general correspondence (Standard 25).

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.