

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Patrick Gough
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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

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd is a registered fostering agency. The agency office is situated in Ramsgate town and supports carers in the East Kent region and is looking to expand its recruitment outside East Kent area. At the time of the inspection there were 11 approved foster placements and eight children in placement. The agency's premises has a reception area, offices for the responsible individual and the administration team. There is a meeting room for use by staff, carers and children and a separate facility used to provide day care for children that have no educational placement. There are two rooms on the upper floor, one which is the office for the fostering manager and the finance manager and the other which is used for meetings and training. The statement of purpose, is made available to placing authorities. The children's guide is made available to the young person prior to placement.

Summary

This was an announced inspection to regulate the operation of the fostering service and to follow up on the action taken to address the requirements and recommendations issued at the previous inspection. The findings of the visit are based on the agency's application of the key National Minimum Standards and its adherence to the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The agency supports the carers to apply national guidance and the National Minimum Standards (NMS) to encourage the children to pursue a healthy lifestyle. The children would benefit from more specific target setting in relation to wider health issues. There is a policy on health matters and there is good reference to its implementations in the records. Carers are actively involved in supporting children with their formal education. There is, however insufficient evidence of attainment measurement. The care planning is effective and a comprehensive pathway planning format has recently been produced for widespread use. The concept of a life skills programme for implementation with all children is planned. Training for carers, supplementing the mandatory 'skills to foster' course, is more organised. There is a schedule of training for each year. The carers are adequately supported and informed about policies, procedures and allowances. The children are happy in their placements and confirm that they feel safe, are well supported and consulted about their welfare. Action taken by the agency on the requirements and recommendation issued at the previous inspection has resulted in improvements to management within the agency, safeguarding of children and financial processes. The written document evidencing the agreement between the agency and the placing authority to place children with foster carers is inadequate and does not contain the required information. The quality assurance function of the panel is not recorded and not reflected in the regulation 42 monitoring reports. The access to essential information for agency staff is restricted by the current information technology provision.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The responsible individual was required to improve the management of the service. A new manager has been appointed and management and staff roles have been clarified. This has resulted in a more organised approach to working with carers. The measures implemented to meet the requirements to safeguard the children through better risk assessing and behaviour management have been effective. Children's welfare has also been improved through more

rigorous recruitment of staff and carers. The safeguarding of confidential information, in the agency's office and the safety of the staff and any other people, whilst on the premises, is increased through improved front door security and new fire safety measures. Most of the recommendations have been addressed successfully. The Statement of Purpose has been updated. The registered person was asked to improve documentation to reflect the provision of health, education and pathway planning for the young people. The carers and the young people benefit from better pre-placement information and planning processes resulting from the service's better links with placing authorities. Training for carers is more organised and there is a clear plan for each year. There have been improvements to the administration within the agency. The content in the files is better organised and file management is being developed. New file management processes, communicated to all staff, has increased consistency of recording. Following the recommendations issued at the previous inspection, the agency has strengthened its financial planning and processes. The carers are fully informed about allowances and the processes to access them.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The agency provides the essential written documentation to guide the carers on matters relating to the children's health. Whilst there is limited health information provided by the placing authority at the referral stage, the agency endeavours to secure sufficient details to inform the carer. There is a health profile included in each child's care plan. The profile fails to identify targets that the carer should address with the child to promote their health. There is however numerous references within documentation, such as supervision visit notes, the child's review reports and their daily logs to indicate that healthy lifestyles are promoted. Children are encouraged to eat healthily and engage in exercise through a variety of activities within the home environment and within the community. The carers have received training on health promotion through the 'skills to foster' course. Two training courses specific to healthy eating and sexual health were provided for carers. A practical healthy eating session, specially designed for the children and incorporating the preparation of a meal, was recently presented. The carers illustrated how they promote health and the children confirmed that they are supported to aspire to healthy living.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency implements its recruitment policy and guidance in a robust fashion. The content in personnel records confirms that the process of selection is designed to safeguard the children. In practice, the agency demonstrates that it achieves this objective. The records provide evidence of the process and satisfies the requirements of Schedule 2 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. All the various checks are conducted and where there are anomalies in the application form, including gaps in employment, these are addressed in the interview. Telephone enquiries are made to request a verbal reference in support of a written one. The supervising social workers have an appropriate qualification and considerable experience within the social care setting. The staff have a good awareness of the legislation governing practice. A student social worker, currently on placement, receives the appropriate supervision by a qualified social worker and regular formal 1:1 support. The foster carers are carefully selected through a rigorous assessment process. The assessment covers relevant matters related to the carers' own upbringing, skills and competencies. This informs good matching outcomes and consequently

provides good outcomes for the children. The accommodation provided for the children is of a good quality and the carers follow the agency's guidance in ensuring safe and secure placements. Health and safety, safe caring and other safety related training feature in the agency's training plan. Children are appropriately placed with suitable foster carers through an effective pre-approval assessment process and careful matching. Recently submitted referral documentation confirms that relevant information is sought in order to start the matching process. Where there was limited information supplied on previous occasions, the agency demonstrated that it sought to acquire more. This was done by communicating with the child's social worker, previous carers and where appropriate, the child's family. The children are happy in their current placements. The placement agreement does not conform to the requirements outlined in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services regulations 2002. In particular it fails to contain specific reference to the matching considerations in agreeing the placement. The content of the child protection policy, the Statement of Purpose and the carers' handbook provides clear guidance for the carers on safeguarding. The children are protected from abuse and kept safe through effective implementation of this guidance by the carers. The carers are conversant with the safe caring policy and engage in training on an annual basis. The children feel safe in the carers' homes and with the carers. The carer support group, which meets monthly, is acknowledged as a good network support. The agency staff have a good understanding of safeguarding issues and work closely with the carers to impart this. The fostering panel conducts its business in the prescribed way and satisfies the requirements as indicated in the regulations. There is adequate representation on the panel to advise the agency on health and education matters. Good representation also enables panel members to critically assess carers' abilities to support the children in these areas in the course of making recommendations to the decision maker. Whilst there is acknowledgement that the registered person indicated that the panel contributes to quality assurance, there is no written evidence of this process.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The agency recognises the degree of diverse needs within its placements. Positive matching has contributed to successful outcomes for children who have different cultural backgrounds to that of their carers. Carers have made considerable efforts and work with the child, child's social worker and family to determine the extent of the input required. Equal opportunities training, which includes input on race, culture and disability is provided by the agency. Advice and practical support is sought locally to supplement carers' knowledge and direct them to the appropriate resource. Awareness of cultural issues is raised through themed activities where dress, food and music feature in illustrating a particular culture or way of life. This involves the fostered children, birth children, the carers and the staff. Diverse education and social needs are similarly identified and positively addressed by the carers and the agency. The children are supported to maintain their school placements through effective practical support by the carers and agency staff. The majority of the children are in full time education. Where children are excluded or experience difficulty in sustaining their interest, the agency advocates on their behalf. The agency guidance, in the foster care agreement, clearly outlines the carers' responsibilities for promoting formal education. The carers liaise closely with the schools and contribute to planning and reviews. Children, who for a short or medium term period, are excluded from school, benefit from the 'day-care' programme at the agency's office. The focus on self esteem and behaviour management contributes to the children's re-integration to formal education. The agency does not have a effective method of recording and evaluating the

children's educational attainments. This limits their opportunity for enhancement and further education.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The contact arrangements, agreed between the placing authority and the parents, are stated within the placement and care plan. The provision of contact is considered when making a decision on the most appropriate placement for the child. There is clear guidance for the carers on how contact should be maintained. Initial training and subsequent formal supervision stresses the importance of regular contact for the child. Where an agency social worker supervises contact, the agency conducts a risk assessment designed to protect the child and the supervisor. Recording systems are in place to note the frequency and impact of the contact on the child. These records are routinely completed and provide a good chronology and evaluation of the contact. The agency liaises with the child's social worker on contact issues, regularly, and where necessary. There are various consultation opportunities presented to the children. These range from informal exchanges within the home to formally organised monthly forums. The children benefit from the consultation process. There is a formal system in place if children wish to register a complaint. The children and the carers are conversant with this.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

The agency has created a comprehensive pathway plan package, which is currently implemented with older children. The programme was initially produced by a carer and successfully applied, in practice, with one young person leaving care. The plan addresses, in the initial stages, many basic life skills and progresses to the more complex independence skills. Whilst the agency plans to commence pathway planning when a child reaches their 14th birthday, younger children do not benefit from the same opportunity to expand their life skills knowledge. Pathway plan training is provided for the carers. The improvements made to considering the needs of young people preparing for adulthood enhances their chance of success. The agency's policy on allowances and information for carers is clear and covers all aspects of the child's placement. The carers benefit from prompt payment and appreciate the agency's commitment to their financial support.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

The Statement of Purpose contains the necessary information to inform the parents, placing authorities and other interested parties of the agency's intent to provide. It is included in the foster carer handbook and the statement of intent, aligned with the National Minimum Standards, supports the other guidance in the handbook. The information for the children is produced in formats suitable for their particular age group. The staffing structure is clearly outlined in the Statement of Purpose. Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities and who they are accountable to. The staff are well supported and encouraged to increase their knowledge and develop their skills. Their professional training needs are identified through regular formal supervision and appraisal. There is a training plan in place which reflects the core training needs of the carers. The carers maintain an up to date portfolio of training. The staff who conduct assessments of prospective foster carers are qualified and experienced to do so. Formal supervision of supervising social workers, which focuses on the effectiveness of

their support to carers, takes place on a regular timescale. The staffing quota properly reflects the size of the agency and the number of carers and placements. The staff have a broad range of child care practice, and some management experience, in a variety of settings. The agency aims to provide a range of carers to meet the children's needs and largely succeeds. It is planning to recruit more widely to strengthen its carer experience range and geographical availability. The assessment of prospective carers is a rigorous one and places a clear emphasis on securing appropriate placements for children. The carers are adequately supported through formal supervision processes and other networks. Home visits are conducted on a monthly basis by supervising social workers. A weekly telephone call is made to each household and there is 'out of hours' assistance should it be required. Planned training sessions and the carers support group, which meets regularly, provide other forums from which carers benefit. The staff and the carers understand the respective roles of the supervising social worker and the child's social worker. Satisfactory recording formats are used to monitor the carers' practice. The children's case records are well maintained and provide a clear written account of the level of care and support given to them. The policy on case recording outlines the responsibilities for agency staff and carers and indicates the child's right to access their records. The carer is given all the essential information received from the placing authority and has the opportunity to view the child's file in the agency's office. The files relating to the children and carers are stored securely. Office administration policies are in place and are currently being reviewed and developed to improve access to information and the filing systems. There is an 'access to file' process and a monitoring sheet on each file. Access to shared information which is stored electronically is somewhat restricted and there are proposals in place to upgrade the computer system to improve this. The administrative staff have a good understanding of the requirements relating to confidentiality and the proper management of records.

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
8	create and use a placement agreement format that fully includes all elements in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002 (Regulation 34 (3))	24 August 2007

Recommendations

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

- create a health plan for each child which identifies targets for implementation
- contact referees following the receipt of references to check validity and expand on the content if appropriate
- provide written evidence of the quality assurance function of the fostering panel and how the managers of the agency inform the panel about the service
- create a system to monitor and track the educational attainments of the children

- create a life skills programme which can be implemented with children of all ages
- provide an office computer system designed to provide better communication and access to essential information for agency staff.

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.