

SWIIS Foster Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stella Henderson
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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

SWIIS Foster Care is an independent fostering service that aims to provide foster placements for children and young people who are unable to live within their birth families. The agency recruits foster carers who undergo an assessment process and once approved carers receive support and further training from a qualified and experienced social worker.

Summary

This announced key inspection of SWIIS foster care was used to assess the service's capacity to meet the outcome areas for being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. The outcome area for achieving economic well-being were not assessed on this occasion. Key National Minimum Standards (NMS) are generally met and the service has more strengths than weaknesses. There are no weaknesses relating to health and education. The monitoring of processes and procedures is not sufficiently robust however, and does not therefore identify gaps in recording systems and key documentation. The fostering agency provides good support for carers and works well with partner agencies, but consultation with children, young people and their families is under-developed.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

This is the service's first inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

The good health and well being of children and young people is maintained and improved through effective assessments, prompt referral to relevant agencies and well established working relationships with key professionals. Sound policies and procedures are in place which support good practice overall. For example, children and young people receive health assessments prior to and throughout the duration of the placement. This is reflected in clear and thorough written health care plans, reviews and carers supervision notes and enables the health and physical development of children and young people to be regularly monitored and reviewed. Children and young people are registered with local primary health care services and specialist services are sought where needed. For example, children and young people have access to therapeutic services and specialist health advisors where required and both foster carers and children and young people have access to the services of an agency health advisor. Health promotion is seen as an important tool in enabling children and young people to make positive health choices and, training and support is available for carers around such issues as healthy eating, emotional well-being and sexual health. On an individual level, children and young people receive practical advice and support on relevant health issues and they are encouraged, where appropriate, to take responsibility for their own health. One young person commented that their diet is more balanced through being helped with food shopping, preparation and cooking. Healthy eating and exercise is promoted and, one young person stated 'I always get advice on health because I need good nutrition so my baby will be healthy, fit and well'.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The service is managed by suitably qualified and experienced people who ensure that children and young people are satisfactorily safeguarded and their welfare promoted. The agency has a good range of operational policies and procedures, such as those for recruitment and selection and staff supervision and training, that are used to effectively promote the safety and welfare of young people. For example, staff undergo appropriate background checks before starting work at the agency and prospective carers are comprehensively assessed on their suitability to foster. Foster carers receive unannounced visits and the safety and the well-being of young people is central to discussions in the regular supervision that carers receive. Wherever possible, introductory visits are arranged between children, young people and their prospective carers and effective support is offered to carers to help maintain and sustain placements. This helps children and young people improve their capacity to develop secure attachments with consequent good outcomes. There is generally a high level of vigilance and scrutiny of placements. Fostering support workers ensure that the child or young person in placement is observed wherever possible, is being supervised appropriately and that the safe care policy being implemented. Sound child protection procedures and other measures such as health and safety checks, annual foster carer reviews and systems to manage allegations and concerns offer additional safeguarding to children and young people. Safeguarding which is otherwise good and effective is undermined, however, by gaps in key procedures and decision-making processes. This makes children and young people vulnerable and increases the chance of placement breakdown. For example, documents and other records do not show how the foster carers skills are matched with the child's or young person's needs. There are no foster placement agreements in place and in one or two cases, no care plans which the matching process and the long term decision for permanence should take into account. Where matches are made for permanence, it is unclear when these decisions have been made and who has been consulted. The fostering panel ensures that only those who have been thoroughly assessed are recommended for approval. Cases presented are thoroughly scrutinised and issues for further discussion are identified. Prospective foster carers have the opportunity of attending fostering panel and assessing social workers are available to provide further information and clarification on assessments presented. Some prospective foster carers commented that the process of assessment was 'very thorough. We enjoyed the training and learned things about ourselves'. Fostering panel members are subject to relevant checks and have a wide range of experience and good understanding of the needs of children and young people. Panel members have access to appropriate training and advice and undertake reviews of their work. There is some blurring of the roles of some panel members, however, and reasons for recommendations are not routinely noted which means there is no explanation or rationale for the wide age ranges and categories of approval. Additionally, the fostering panel does not always have full information on which to base its recommendations, such as updated care plans. This means that children and young people are at risk of being placed with individuals who cannot meet their needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The fostering agency provides children and young people with services that value diversity and promote equality. It achieves this by endeavouring to recruit carers whose ethnicity and culture is representative of multi-cultural society and of the needs of children and young people placed with the agency. Aspects of equality and diversity are addressed as part of the assessment of

prospective carers and wherever trans-racial placements are under consideration. For example, one respite carer commented that 'when I was approached to do respite for a child from a different culture the first topic discussed was 'how could I meet the child's cultural and ethnic needs and challenge misconceptions'. Training and individual support enables carers to become familiar with how to gain support and advice on caring for children and young people from different ethnic backgrounds. Carers can access information, for example, on alternative food outlets and places of worship. Religious denomination and ethnicity is inconsistently recorded, however, which means that children and young people's faith needs are not identified and met. Carers working with children and young people who may have additional needs are generally provided with support and appropriate information. A stakeholder commented that carers for one particular child had provided 'a very good level of care and worked well within a difficult situation with an autistic child and parent with complex mental health needs'. One carer commented however on the need for more training in developing communication skills for children and young people with disability and ideas 'to help stimulate and inspire the child'. Children and young people's development and general care is also undermined by a lack of information to carers who provide short term breaks. One carer commented on the lack of feedback about how the child gets on with activities or at school, or the conclusions of investigative tests so 'therefore how can I help the child more without this information?' The fostering agency places a high priority on educational achievement. Attitudes and understanding of prospective foster carers towards education is assessed, as well as their ability to provide a home environment that is conducive to learning. Clear plans are set out to achieve improved educational outcomes and this progress is regularly assessed and feeds into the planning and review process. Children and young people clearly benefit from the importance attached to ensuring that they do well and reach their potential, both academically and in terms of encouraging their talents, interests and hobbies. A dedicated education support worker takes a pro-active role, alongside carers, and together they provide excellent educational outcomes for children and young people. One stakeholder commented that the education support worker 'has been key in moving the child on from the pupil referral unit to full time mainstream education' and another that carers had given 'outstanding support for enjoying and achieving, introducing the child to a wide range of experiences - speech and self-confidence have increased dramatically'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is satisfactory.

Children and young people are helped to develop a sense of identity and belonging through being able to maintain contact with family and friends. The fostering agency encourages, supports and facilitates contact but ensures that it is organised in a way that protects children and young people and helps older children to exercise an element of choice and control. For example, risk assessments are undertaken which help to indicate the level of supervision required, if any, during contact visits. All carers receive training about the importance of contact and how to manage it. They are expected to report on how contact arrangements are progressing, the quality of contact and its impact on children and young people. One parent commented that foster parents 'are fantastic about arranging contact at any time'. Although some effort is made to take into account the views of children and young people, systematic consultation is limited and inconsistent both in terms of obtaining their views about how the service is delivered and in decisions made about their lives. There is no participation strategy for the full and active involvement of children and young people at every level which means that they have little opportunity to have an effective impact on policy and practice.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

Children and young people placed with this fostering agency experience improvements to their development and well being across a range of outcomes. This is achieved by a clear management focus on safeguarding, good practice and the generally effective implementation of a range of policies and procedures. For example, the agency has a strategy for recruitment and working with carers. Prospective carers are rigorously assessed and, once approved, receive regular on-going support, supervision and training. Staff are suitably qualified and experienced in working with children and young people in the care system and understand the challenges of fostering. The skills and competences of staff enable carers to provide the type of environments where children and young people can develop and flourish. Children and young people are safeguarded by a high level of vigilance and scrutiny of foster care practice. Carers undergo annual reviews, home safety checks and receive unannounced visits. Supervision of carers focuses on the safety and development of children and young people and identifies where carers may need extra support. Carers are clear about their role and what is expected of them and any concerns raised about safeguarding or other matters is promptly responded to. File management and other systems are in place to document processes such as case recording for children and young people, foster carer approval and quality assurance. There are gaps in these processes, however, which undermine other safeguarding mechanisms and leave children and young people vulnerable and exposed to risk. For example, there are no foster placement agreements in place to demonstrate how the needs of children and young people are matched with foster carers skills, and reasons for recommendations at panel are not recorded. Care plans were missing from some files and one carer reported that on two occasions 'looked after children paperwork was not provided'. Ethnicity and religious denomination is not accurately recorded and risk assessments are incomplete. Monitoring of the service is not robust enough to highlight these shortfalls and compromises the otherwise good and safe care provided by the service for children and young people. The Statement of Purpose accurately reflects the services being provided by the fostering agency. This, along with the children's guide, is presented in a form that is easily understood by children and young people and their families. This enables them to know what services they can expect, what they are entitled to and how they will be cared for. Staffing levels are adequate to maintain the smooth running of the service and to fulfil the Statement of Purpose.

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	enter into a written agreement (in these regulations referred to as 'the foster placement agreement') with the foster parent	29 August 2008

	which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (Regulation 34)(3)	
30	make a written record of the reasons for recommendations of approval (Regulation 25 (2))	29 August 2008

Recommendations

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

- ensure that children's opinions, and those of their families and others significant to the child, are sought over all issues which are likely to affect their daily life and future (NMS 11.1)
- ensure that up to date, comprehensive records are maintained for each child or young person (NMS 24.1)
- monitor the quality and adequacy of records and take remedial action when necessary (NMS 25.3)

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.