

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Diane Thackrah
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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 and Sussex regions.

The accommodation includes a reception area and offices for the responsible individual and the administration team. There is a meeting room for use by staff, carers and children and young people and a separate facility used to provide day care for children that have no educational placement. There are rooms on the upper floor used by the finance manager and for meetings and training.

Summary

At this announced key inspection, all key national minimum standards were assessed. The is a good service in all outcome areas.

Young people have their health needs promoted and protected. All have their health needs clearly logged and monitored. The agency ensures that young people have access to medical professionals and that carers are trained in a wide range of health care issues. Policies and procedures are in place which go some way to ensuring that young people stay safe. These include robust staff and carer recruitment practices, health and safety checks on carers' homes and a fostering panel that serves to quality assure the functions of the agency. Young people are supported to enjoy and achieve. The agency values diversity and respects young people as individuals. Education is seen as important and is strongly encouraged by both the agency and foster carers. Education is sought that is appropriate to young people's needs and young people's achievements are celebrated and rewarded.

Young people benefit from being supported to maintain appropriate contact with their family members. The agency facilitates contact arrangements and monitors its success. Young people's views are respected and actively sought. The positive relationships that are encouraged by the agency and foster carers help young people to have their say about the things that effect them. Young people are supported to have a positive progression into adulthood and learn skills for independence throughout their placements. This is a well run agency. Staff are qualified and trained to do their jobs well. Foster carers are carefully selected and receive good support and training which allows them to care for young people well.

The agency uses a variety of placement agreements that are drawn up by different placing authorities. This means that some placement agreements comply with regulations, while others do not.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

The registered provider was also asked to implement health plans, verify references, provide written evidence of the quality assurance functions of the fostering service panel, create systems for monitoring and tracking young people's educational attainments, implement a life skills

programme and improve the office communication systems. Positive action has been taken in all of these areas and this action promotes young people's well-being.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people have their health and development well promoted by the agency. Health needs are documented in order to ensure that these needs are known by those caring for young people and are met. Carers are clear about who is responsible for giving consent to medical treatment for young people. Health needs are monitored by the agency through regular home visits to foster carers. Young people are offered training by the agency in areas such as healthy eating, first aid and sexual health awareness. Feedback from one carer about a child placed with them was, 'they have completed a healthy living course with the agency.' A young person who is fostered said, 'They help me with my diet'. A social worker said, 'young people are encouraged to stay fit and healthy.' Foster carers are encouraged by the agency to make sure young people engage in activities that they can enjoy whilst getting physically fit, building confidence and self esteem.

The agency has good links with the local looked after children nurse in order to ensure that young people undergo required medicals and to provide information about health and well-being. A medical advisor sits on the fostering panel and foster carers receive training in a wide range of health issues. The agency also has links with other health care professionals, such as the child and adolescent mental health service.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

This agency is run by people concerned with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young people. Feedback from one carer about the agency was, 'they are always very helpful, they listen and are good at passing on information about the young people placed with us.' Another carer said, 'I like the agency very much.' A social worker said of a young person, 'the agency are very supportive towards their placement.'

Young people live in safe and comfortable accommodation that is checked for hazards annually. Foster carers undergo health and safety training and are given guidelines on their health and safety responsibilities. There is a careful matching process which helps to ensure that young people are appropriately placed to have their needs met. Careful consideration is given to young people's racial background, the needs of young people already placed and birth children. One carer said, 'I get lots of information from the agency before young people are placed with me.' 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.

Foster carers receive training regarding safe care, abuse and the management of challenging behaviour and this helps to ensure that young people are protected from abuse. Safe caring guidelines are provided to carers and each young person has an individual care plan and risk assessment that helps carers understand how to keep them safe. Carers feel well consulted with by the agency in regards to keeping young people safe and are clear about acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour management. A social worker commented that the foster carer was able to help a fostered young person have 'a heightened awareness of safety'. Bullying

is taken seriously by the agency and carers are provided with information about how to protect young people from bullying. Guidelines are in place which provide carers with the information they need to help keep young people who go missing, safe.

The policies and procedures regarding the recruitment of staff members and foster carers are robust and go some way to protecting the welfare of young people. There is an effective and efficient fostering panel that provides a quality assurance function to the agency in relation to the assessment and review process. This ensures that any problems can be identified and put right and that there is a consistent approach that benefits carers and young people.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Equality and diversity is promoted and celebrated by the agency. Young people are treated as individuals and much is done to develop their confidence and self-esteem. Equality and diversity training is mandatory for all carers and staff. The registered provider has demonstrated a commitment to the recruitment of foster carers from a variety of ethnic backgrounds in order to meet the individual needs of young people when matching them to a family. Young people's religious needs are taken into consideration and provision is made for them to attend places of worship should they wish to. Young people are also positively supported to understand their sexuality and carers receive training to help them support young people who have a disability. The agency does not provide short breaks.

Young people are supported to learn and achieve as the agency values education. One carer's feedback includes, 'they supported us with problems at school and helped find a solution to this.' Another said, 'it's very important to the agency that the young people get education.'

The agency liaises well with educational establishments in order to promote young people's educational achievements. Young people have up-to-date personal education plans which the agency contributes effectively to. Foster carers are clear about their roles in relation to education with this information being clearly logged. One carer confirmed that they transport one young person to and from school each day. Educational attainment is logged in order to monitor young people's progress.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Young people are able to enjoy positive contact with their family members. Clear arrangements are in place which allow young people to maintain and develop family contacts. This is set out in care plans and placement agreements, with the agreement of the placing authority. The agency actively supports this by providing funding and transport for placements and managing supervised contacts. Contact arrangements are closely monitored to ensure young people's well-being. Attention is paid to supporting contact where a young person is placed outside of the area. Carers are supported by the agency to understand the importance of appropriate contact. One carer said that they had been involved in helping a young person to develop positive contact with a sibling. The agency maintains positive contact with some birth family members in order to promote positive outcomes for young people. Young people's views are sought and respected in determining contact arrangements.

Young people are listened to and their views are taken seriously. Carers and agency staff ensure that young people are able to have their say at statutory reviews regarding things that concern them and are able to complete consultancy documents before reviews. Agency staff talk to young people during regular visits to foster carers' homes and their views are sought prior to placements being made. All young people have an information pack with telephone numbers and contact details of people who they can talk to. Support groups, training workshops and social activities are arranged and young people are encouraged to contribute their ideas to how these are organised. The registered provider gave an example of one young person being taken on an overseas trip in response to their request to connect with their heritage. The agency is in the process of developing a system whereby young people create their own consultancy arrangements.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Positive action is taken by the agency in order to prepare young people for adulthood. The agency and foster carers support young people from an early age to develop skills for independence. The agency provides age-appropriate life skills booklets to young people to help them develop and identify independent living skills that work alongside pathway plans. Clear written guidelines are in place regarding the expectations of foster carers in terms of preparing young people for independent living. Pathway plans are in place where this is appropriate and the agency works with the local support agencies towards good independence planning. Many of the young people have taken part in first aid and healthy eating training organised by the agency.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well run agency. There is a Statement of Purpose that sets out what the agency intends to do and the facilities and services it provides. This ensures that placing authorities, carers, parents and young people have the information they need about the agency. Three separate children and young people's guides are in place aimed at different ages and levels of understanding. These set out what children and young people can expect from the agency and how they can secure access to an independent advocate and how to complain. There is currently an acting manager in place and this person has made an application for the post of registered manager.

Good systems exist for quality assurance and there are clear lines of accountability within the agency. Clear information is provided to placing authorities regarding the charges for the service. Workers say that there is good organisation in the agency and effective management. Staff supervision occurs regularly, including for the registered provider and this helps the agency to function in a professional way. Training and development is viewed as important and both staff and foster carers have excellent opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge through the agency training programme. One carer said, 'we have lots of training.' Another carer said, 'I really enjoy the training' and 'the agency provides the training that you think you need.'

There is a careful foster carer selection process, including pre-approval training and good ongoing support for carers once approved by the agency. Carers' roles are clearly defined and there is a carers' handbook that sets out the agency's strategy for working with them. This

includes the role of the supervising social worker. All household members undergo safe caring training prior to young people being placed with them. Supervising social workers visit foster carers regularly to ensure that placements are progressing successfully.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Young people are treated as individuals and have their individual needs clearly detailed in care plans.

Good systems exist for record keeping within the agency and within foster carers' homes. An agency worker said, 'we ensure that carers keep information about young people secure and check this at visits.' Each young person has a permanent, private and secure record of their progress.

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
4	ensure that there is a placement agreement format that fully includes all elements in Schedule 6 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. (Regulation 34 (3))	9 September 2010

Recommendations

There are no recommendations.