

# Wellcare Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Seka Graovac
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<b>Provision subtype</b>	

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<b>Registered manager</b>	Jill Maria Plummer
<b>Responsible individual</b>	John William Dilleyston
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	17/02/2009

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Wellcare Fostering Services is privately owned. It was registered as an independent fostering agency in October 2004. The agency aims to recruit, supervise and support foster carers in meeting the needs of looked after children by local authorities. It provides a variety of placements, including parent and child placements. While foster carers come from different areas of London, the agency's office is North West London. The agency has eleven approved fostering households. It is currently providing seven placements within four foster families.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **inadequate**.

The service has many strengths, but there are some significant shortfalls in respect of safeguarding children and securing their welfare. The agency's handling of safeguarding concerns and allegations raised by children is not robust. Appropriate authorities are not always informed of the allegations being made or other significant events. The agency is not providing a fostering service that fully meets the national minimum standards and fostering regulations. Some basic written policies and procedures, such as those relating to the child protection arrangements and dealing with complaints do not include all required information. Record keeping is not up to the required standard. Monitoring is ineffective. The agency allows people who have not been rigorously vetted to have unsupervised access to children, foster carers and confidential information. The agency cannot demonstrate that it protects children and that it promotes their welfare, effectively.

Apart from safeguarding and management, the other aspects of the service provision are either good or satisfactory. Children and young people are making adequate progress overall. They have made very significant progress in their education. They receive good support to build their confidence, social and independence skills. Foster carers are highly satisfied with the support they themselves receive from the agency. When responded to an Ofsted survey, a child rated the support they receive from the

foster carers as excellent, but thought that the people who own the agency do not do a good job.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
12 (2011)	prepare and implement a written policy regarding the arrangements for the protection of children that includes a statement of measures to be taken to safeguard any child before making parent and child arrangements with that foster parent (Regulation 12.(2))	15/08/2012
12 (2011)	prepare and implement a written policy regarding the arrangements for the protection of children that includes each point under Regulation 12.(3) (Regulation 12.(3))	15/08/2012
18 (2011)	establish a written procedure for considering complaints that includes all the details as specified by The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 (Regulation 18.(2))	15/08/2012
20 (2011)	do not allow a person to work unsupervised for the purposes of the agency until full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 and NMS 19.3 (Regulation 20.(1)(2)(3)(4))	25/07/2012
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed, receive appropriate appraisal (Regulation 21.(4)(a))	15/08/2012
22 (2011)	ensure that all records with respect to fostering service are maintained accurately and kept up to date (Regulation 22.(1))	11/07/2012
36 (2011)	notify Ofsted in writing and without delay of any events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 (Regulations 36. (1)(2), Schedule 7)	25/07/2012
11 (2011)	must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times (Regulation 11.(a))	25/07/2012
12 (2011)	must implement a written policy which is intended to safeguard children placed with foster carers from abuse or neglect and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12.1(a)(b))	25/07/2012

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and disputes (NMS 3.8)
- children are responded positively on their return to the fostering household, after a period of missing (NMS 5)
- inspect the foster home annually, without appointment to ensure that it continues to provide a suitable physical environment (NMS 10.5)
- follow up with the responsible authority any gaps or inconsistencies in the referral information provided, prior to agreeing the placement; this includes clarifying the nature of any parent and child placement (NMS 15.2; Volume 4 of The Children Act 1989)
- update regularly the foster carers' handbook (NMS 21.10)
- submit the agency's child protection procedures for consideration and comment to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and to the Local Authority Designated Officer (NMS 22.4)
- report all allegations against members of the fostering households to the LADO. (NMS 22.6)

## Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **adequate**.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers who can provide them with a stable, family environment. Siblings are placed together and their positive relationships are appropriately facilitated. Children and young people rarely experience unplanned moves. However, recently, a permanent foster placement broke down. This has happened following repeated allegations of physical abuse being made by the young person against the foster carer. Although unfounded, the allegations indicate that at times, the young person did not feel safe and settled in the placement. In liaison with the children's social care services, the agency supported the young person to successfully move on.

There have been some other examples when the relationship between the foster carer and the young person broke down irreparably. This was mainly due to the young people's challenging behaviour. On one occasion, this has also led to a safeguarding allegation being made against the carer. A weakness in the standard of care that the young person received in relation to behaviour management has been identified as to have played a part. The agency is appropriately supporting the carer to improve. The young person has moved on.

Apart from one emergency placement that has been made only very recently, children and young people currently fostered by the agency are well settled. All

children and young people behave constructively and enjoy having positive relationships with their foster carers. In varying degrees, they are making good or satisfactory progress in many different aspects of their lives. However, some young people are still struggling with low self-esteem and body image.

All children and young people are in full time education. They are provided with additional support when it is needed to contribute to their achievements. Their school attendance is high and they are doing really well at school. For example, one young person successfully took their exams a year earlier than predicted.

Children and young people are generally in good health and report feeling safe. They are supported to express their views, feelings and wishes and feel generally listened to. They enjoy taking part in various leisure activities and developing appropriate friendships. A social worker commented positively about a foster carer's flexibility to accommodate the increased family contact for children. On the other hand, Ofsted survey indicates that at times, there are issues relating to foster carer's views and understanding of the significance of the contact for the child.

### **Quality of service**

The quality of the service is **adequate**.

The fostering panel functions effectively. The chair appropriately supports the agency's more rigorous processes of assessment and approval of foster carers. Foster carers have been carefully selected to ensure that they are suitable to provide foster care and have skills to meet the needs of looked after children.

Once approved, foster carers are given a handbook which covers various aspects of good practice in relation to their role in safeguarding children and promoting positive outcomes. However, this handbook still refers to the national minimum standards for fostering services that have been revoked on 31 March 2011. The foster carers are not given the most up to date written guidance and information in relation to their role. The agency has recently started to address this, by providing additional information, electronically.

The agency's workforce, including foster carers, come from diverse backgrounds. The service is effective at giving a prominent place to the promotion of diversity and anti-discriminatory practice. Any limiting attitudes that a foster carer expresses in this respect are appropriately challenged by the agency.

Foster carers are supervised by student social workers, but also have easy access to the agency's qualified social workers. Foster carers receive regular support and supervision to help them to look after foster children effectively and to ensure that positive outcomes for children are achieved. The agency also organises regular foster carers' meetings and sends newsletters. Foster carers are highly satisfied with the support given to them by the agency, including out of hours.

The agency appropriately facilitates foster carers' progress in achieving the Childcare

Workforce Development Council training standards in foster care, within the appropriate timescales. The agency has a comprehensive training plan that covers various aspects of the promotion of positive outcomes for children and young people. However, a number of foster carers have not received training in behaviour management. The agency's clear policy in relation to behaviour management is in place and foster carers have regular opportunities to discuss behaviour management with the agency.

Another weakness is that the foster carers do not demonstrate a high commitment to their own training. For example, it was at their request, that the agency has reduced the length of training sessions. Foster carers also suggested less training, as the only thing they would like to see changed, when they talked with Ofsted. However, this has not had a negative impact on the way they support education and general learning of foster children.

The reviews of each carer are regularly held and include a consideration of foster carer's training and development needs. All foster carers have a personal and professional development plan. The agency regularly evaluates the training and works closely with the foster carers. This enables them to reflect on what they have learnt and how they can use this to improve their foster care practice.

A commissioner and other professionals external to the agency confirmed that the agency's matching process is usually very good. However, there have been some examples when the agency could not demonstrate that it sought clarity and information at the point of accepting a placement. This included a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the mother and child placement. When an emergency placement was made, the agency did not clarify the inconsistencies in the referral information provided. This was a significant gap, as the information related to the health needs and indicated an increased risk.

Foster carers say that they usually receive clear and comprehensive information about the foster children. Foster children receive appropriate care and support that is in line with their individual placement plans. Children's social workers are generally satisfied with the service provided.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **inadequate** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Although children and young people report feeling generally safe, the agency's procedure and practice in relation to dealing with safeguarding concerns do not protect them fully. The agency is unable to demonstrate that when a child raises a protection concern in relation to their foster carer that these are always followed up in the most robust way. The allegations are not always handled in the manner that it is in the best interest of the child. On at least one occasion, in liaison with the child's social worker, the agency has carried out their own investigation. It concluded not to proceed further, due to the lack of the physical evidence that the alleged physical

abuse took place. This is despite the child not withdrawing their allegation. The Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding children (LADO) and Ofsted have not been notified.

There has been at least, another instance when Ofsted was not notified of a child protection concern that was raised by a child. Although the agency keeps a log of safeguarding concerns, not all of them are logged. Due to the gaps in record keeping, it is difficult to clearly and with confidence, monitor safeguarding concerns and actions taken to protect children.

The agency's child protection procedure has not been comprehensively written in line with the legislative requirements about its content. These gaps also undermine the effectiveness of safeguarding children and promoting their welfare. For example, the procedure does not provide for the arrangements for foster parents and children to have clear contact details of the area authority and Ofsted for the purpose of referring any concerns about child's welfare or safety. The agency has recently started addressing this weakness by providing foster carers with a flow-chart for reporting concerns.

In the office, the agency's staff have access to a separate file with contact details and correspondence with various Local Safeguarding Children Boards and LADOs. However, the agency's procedure for the protection of children have not been submitted to them for consideration and comment.

The procedure also does not include a statement of measures to be taken to safeguard any child before making parent and child arrangements with the foster carer. This is despite the agency currently providing a mother and child placement.

The agency's procedure for considering complaints is also not comprehensive. It does not cover all the points required by legislation. For example, it does not provide for dealing with complaints about the registered person. The agency's own survey showed that some children did not know how to complain. In response, the management has taken an appropriate action of sending them a letter of introduction and a copy of the complaint's procedure. The recent Ofsted survey indicates that more work needs to be done to ensure that children and professionals external to the agency know how to complain. In the same survey, a social worker indicated a certain level of mistrust in the agency's openness to receive complaints and learn from them.

The agency works in close partnership with other professionals to safeguard children when they are missing from the placement. In one instance, children did not come back to the agency after a period of missing, but continued to be cared for by their family. The agency is not able to demonstrate that children are always appropriately welcomed back on their return, after a period of going missing. For example, on one occasion, without discussing it with any other professional, a foster carer imposed a financial sanction on the young person soon after their return. This was in hope that not having money would prevent the young person from going out and missing again. As the situation escalated, the foster carer also intervened physically to



protect the property. This incident has had a strong detrimental impact on the relationship between the child and the foster carer. It has also led to the highly negative outcomes for both the young person and the foster carer, individually.

Foster carers are carefully selected to ensure that they are suitable for their roles. The panel ensures that all appropriate checks have been completed before they are approved. However, the agency does not always carry out unannounced visits to each fostering household, on an annual basis to ensure that the environment continues to be suitable. This is in line with the agency's policy not to visit foster carers without children in placement, without an appointment. This is in spite of the agency offering emergency placements and despite the related recommendation being raised at the last inspection. For example, one fostering household that was approved in December 2007 has never had an unannounced visit.

The agency's robust selection of foster carers and foster panel members does not extend to student social workers. This is despite student social workers carrying out significant fostering tasks independently and without direct supervision by the agency's staff. For example, student social workers conduct supervising visits to foster households and speak in private to foster carers and foster children. The agency is unable to demonstrate that it took all possible steps to ensure that unsuitable people do not have unsupervised contact with children or access to confidential information. This undermines the protection of children's welfare. The management obtained some of the required information in relation to the currently working student social workers, during the course of the inspection. Some other student social workers have completed their social work placements with this agency, without the agency ever having had sight of the required information.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **inadequate**.

Both registered persons are social workers with many years of post-qualifying work experience. They are highly committed to provide a child-centred service and are able to motivate others to adopt the same approach. The agency's only supervising social worker and six student social workers receive good supervision and support. However, not all appraisals of the individual employee's performance are carried out on time. This was also identified as a shortfall at the last Ofsted visit. Foster carers report feeling part of the team working together to improve children's lives.

The management is actively involved in the delivery of the service and regularly monitors the outcomes for children and young people. This is to ensure that children and young people continue to progress and that any barriers to their progress are appropriately addressed. They also regularly speak to and consult with children and young people through surveys to ensure that they have opportunities to contribute to the development of the service.

However, the management is not effective at running a fostering service that fully

meets the national minimum standards and fostering regulations. The agency's monitoring is not rigorous and not effective in identifying all non-compliance with legislation, the weaknesses in practice and the recording errors. The most significant concern is that the agency is unable to demonstrate that it adequately manages all safeguarding concerns and other significant events. In addition to not always notifying Ofsted when a child or young person makes an allegation against the foster carer, the most recent notification was received almost two months after the allegation was made. Ofsted is also not notified of other significant events, such as serious incidents that necessitated calling the police to the foster carer's home. The agency's own log of safeguarding and other concerns is not appropriately kept, undermining monitoring and possible learning opportunities for the agency.

There is also a number of inaccuracies relating to other records and documentation that are required to be kept by law. These are some of the examples found at the inspection: incorrect placement date on a child protection investigation report; incorrect placement date on the placement record kept on the foster carer's file; the placement record not updated to show that the placement was terminated several months ago and an incomplete staff register. In addition, the written foster care agreements signed by the foster carers and the agency in 2012, still refers to the National Care Standards Commission that ceased existence in 2004; the Statement of Purpose has not been updated on the agency's website; the agency's decision maker signed off the decision sheet, without indicating what the decision is - the letter of approval has been sent to the foster carer by the manager, without making sure that the decision was recorded by the decision maker.

The agency's record keeping is inadequate. The management corrected the records while the inspection was in progress. However, the concern that those errors were made in the first place and had not been identified by the management prior to the inspection gives cause for concern.

At the last Ofsted visit in 2009, the fostering service was judged as providing an overall satisfactory service. This was a monitoring visit that followed two inadequate inspection judgements given by Ofsted at full inspections in 2007 and 2008. The agency has taken steps to address the requirements and recommendations made, but has not been able to demonstrate that it has achieved a sustained improvement.

## 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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

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 independent fostering agencies.