

ISP Sussex

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Paul Clark
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Integrated Services Programme (ISP) Sussex is a separately registered independent fostering agency which is part of a larger child care organisation based in England. The headquarters is situated in Sittingbourne, Kent.

Carers provide long and short term, emergency, respite and parent-and-child care. ISP Sussex provides social work support and supervision to foster carers, educational support and assistance with contact between children and their birth families. The organisation provides a network of intensive therapeutic support via trained therapists and psychology and psychiatric services.

At the time of this inspection, ISP Sussex had 45 approved foster care households with 48 children placed.

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 **outstanding**.

This independent fostering agency provides an outstanding level of foster care for the young people accommodated. It successfully makes and sustains permanent placements for children whilst bringing about positive changes in their lives. This is achieved by the implementation of a therapeutic model of care. This model is organised by a central team of therapeutic professionals and is understood and applied by all staff and carers. Additionally, children make excellent educational progress because of the high quality support provided by the agency's educational resources, which also work in line with the therapeutic model to ensure a consistent approach.

The agency supports young people's contact with their birth families and has a contact suite which allows contact to be carried out in a safe, nurturing and private space. Furthermore, the agency has its own transport provision which supports contact visits and appointments which looked-after children need to make. This reduces the stress and costs of transport and significantly helps children in returning

to their birth families when this is appropriate. The agency consistently monitors and improves the quality of the service and actively involves children and all stakeholders in service development. Children and carers say that they feel part of the agency 'family' and uniformly make positive comments about the high quality care and support.

There are no requirements or recommendations made as a result of this inspection.

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people benefit from stable placements. This is achieved by the careful matching of children with carers and the meticulous care and on-going support that the agency take in introducing children to proposed carers and in maintaining placements. This helps to ensure that young people feel secure and part of the fostering family household.

There are excellent arrangements in place to ensure that young people are actively engaged in all aspects of their care planning and to make a contribution to service development. Children are well consulted about their care whilst they are being looked after. Children are given the full information they need about their foster carers, both verbally and in writing and this helps them in making decisions about their choice of placement. Except in the case of emergency placements, this is followed by a well planned and carefully organised programme of gradual introductions to the foster carers. These measures help to ensure placement stability and reduce the likelihood of unplanned endings

The agency make great efforts to promote excellent relationships between carers and birth families and ensure that children have a knowledge, understanding and acceptance of their backgrounds. Young people always attend their care plan reviews, as do supervising social workers. Birth parents are generally invited to attend the review meetings unless this is otherwise thought to be detrimental to a young person's care. Outcomes of review meetings are scrutinised by the therapeutic team and implemented into all aspects of the agency's care provision.

There are excellent arrangements in place to ensure that children can participate in community and leisure activities. The agency has a young person's coordinator, a qualified social worker to whom children can go to for support and advice and who conducts regular forum meetings which are in the main social and activity based. The agency also conducts periodic questionnaire surveys with young people, when they are asked their opinions of these services. Children say that they experience a wide range of activities and holidays in their foster placements. Several young people spoken to are members of social or sporting clubs. This helps children to integrate into their local community and improves their life experiences and self confidence.

Young people's physical and psychological good health is well promoted by a principle advisor, who is a trained psychologist and who ensures that children and

carers have full and up to date details of children's health histories and that their on-going health care is properly promoted. There are a range of effective systems in place to ensure this including mandatory training in first aid for carers and clear and known policies on smoking cessation, addressing drug and alcohol misuse, promoting sexual health and healthy lifestyle programmes.

Children achieve excellent progress in education in relation to their starting points. For example, the overwhelming majority of young people now attend school or college full time. Many of these young people did not previously attend education, or were failing to make progress. There have been no long-term school exclusions in the past 12 months. Older children and young people make excellent progress in being prepared for independence. They develop a range of life skills through an extensive independent living skills programme which is based on helping them cope with the practical issues of everyday living and this exceptional provision helps them to make a successful transition to adulthood. Young people say that their cultural and racial differences are respected. Carers show consideration and awareness of the religious and cultural beliefs of the young people in their care. If children are of a different racial or cultural group from their carers the service arranges for carers to receive professional advice and guidance related to children's racial and cultural needs.

Quality of service

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

Carers are recruited, prepared, assessed, trained and supervised to an extremely high level. The service recruits a range of carers who are specifically able meet the needs of young people for whom the fostering task may be more challenging and who will be able to engage in the agency's therapeutic approach to care. Carers come from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences and include single carers, same sex couples and couples who are both dedicated full time to the fostering task. The fostering households within the agency are generally individuals and couples who have been with the agency for many years and who are committed to the agency approach of care. Children are actively involved in the recruitment, preparation and training of carers by consultation at forum meetings and by regular questionnaire surveys. One young person who has since left care is regularly consulted on aspects of this provision.

The initial and on-going professional development of carers is of an excellent standard. Assessments are rigorous and the preparation training and on-going training are of a high standard. The assessment and preparation process for carers is thorough and informative and several carers commented that this was of benefit later when they were approved to care for children. Carers' assessments are completed within recommended timescales. Carers undertake the Children's Workforce Development Council qualification immediately after approval. The agency has a carers' advisor, who is a valued member of the therapeutic team with extensive personal experience and skills in foster care. Carers can attend high quality

information forums, often involving presentations and seminars delivered by agencies and individuals who have extensive knowledge of fostering. Carers receive regular supervision within appropriate timescales. Carers are provided with free membership of an organisation that gives them personal advice and guidance about fostering. This enhances their knowledge and understanding of the fostering task.

The fostering panel has an experienced chair and decisions made by panel adhere to clear policies and procedures. The composition of the panel is appropriate and there is a central list of members in accordance with regulations. Panel members are well trained and supervised, with an annual performance appraisal being undertaken. Minutes of panel meetings record clearly the detail of the discussions of issues raised by panel members and evidence excellent rigor in their considerations of foster carers' approval.

Foster carers have good access to a range of health and education services and to the education advisors and the therapeutic team. Carers are well trained and kept informed about the therapeutic approaches planned for young people. They are actively involved in the educational and therapeutic support provided by the agency. This collective approach helps to meet looked-after children's and young people's overall needs. Young people's physical and psychological health is further promoted by a range of medical support services and the educational support they receive from the agency is exemplary.

There is an excellent 'out-of-hours' support service run by managers and supervising social workers, which carers say provides them with a high level of support. The provision of a contact suite and transport further enhances the support given to birth families and to children in maintaining these important links.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Children are kept safe by the provision of proactive and creative safeguarding practice. The agency has clear systems in place to thoroughly review and to learn from all instances of allegations against carers, complaints raised by young people about their care and any placement breakdowns. Staff and carers are well trained in safeguarding children and this training is regularly updated. Young people comment that they feel safe and that if they are unhappy about any element of their care they know how to complain and how to talk to people to express any concerns.

A protocol is in place to deal with any incidents of bullying and children know where they can go to get help in this regard. Children feel confident that any bullying incidents reported to the agency would be dealt with effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service provided by their placing authority. The service also has a specific member of staff to whom young people may raise any concerns or complaints. Complaints are investigated and responded to within determined timescales.

Foster carers receive a high level of training as part of their preparation. They have access to on-going training which includes safeguarding, safe caring and current child protection practice. This training is refreshed over time. Foster carers also receive training on the effects of attachment and loss and birth trauma on children. This ensures that carers have a clear understanding of safeguarding and that they demonstrate an awareness of current practice and the impact of abuse on children's development.

The number of allegations of abuse raised by young people against foster carers is low and these are dealt with effectively. Children and carers are well supported by the enquiry process. The agency has a contractual arrangement with an independent counselling service to provide support for carers and staff who may be affected by events encountered in undertaking the fostering task. A clear process for dealing with allegations ensures that these are handled in a manner which is in the best interests of children and foster carers.

Proactive and creative safeguarding practice is evident in a range of effective procedures. These include unannounced visits to foster carers' homes by the service manager which often take place several times a year and there is a system to record this. Children are always seen alone by placing social workers and asked if they feel safe in placement. Any concerns about foster carers' practice are shared with the management and this can result in the reconsideration of carers' approval.

Staff and carers' recruitment and vetting is thorough. Staff appointed and carers approved are vetted correctly and are aware of their responsibilities to keep children safe. Staff and carers' files are subject to periodic audit to ensure that vetting practice is kept up to a high level of scrutiny.

The incidences of children going missing have reduced. There is a clear procedure in place on the action to be taken in the event of a child going missing. Foster carers are aware of their responsibilities to report children missing from their care and the procedures to be followed. The manager of the service states there is a good collaborative relationship with the local police. The agency is appropriately concerned for the safety of looked after children who go missing and will actively search for them. After any such incident a full review of the event is carried out and learning points are applied to practice.

Leadership and management

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

The performance and delivery of the fostering service is rigorously monitored and is reported upon to the board of directors at least every two months. This ensures that the level of care that fostered children receive within this agency is constantly being scrutinized by senior management. There are action plans in place which identify areas of necessary service development. There was one recommendation made at

the last inspection, which has been addressed. This has resulted in a greater involvement for birth families in service provision. No action requirements or recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection.

The agency hopes to recruit more carers from black and minority ethnic groups to expand the choice of placement for young people. The agency is also intending to expand other areas of their service provision. Children and young people are involved in service development through frequent questionnaire survey and their attendance at consultancy forums. This ensures that children and young people play a significant part in the development of the service.

Social work staff are appointed with relevant child protection knowledge, experience, qualifications and are registered with the national social work body. This helps to ensure that children's needs are properly attended to and that practice is professionally applied. There is an extensive induction process for new staff, which acquaints them with the therapeutic ethos of the agency. Appraisals of social worker and manager competencies take place at least annually. There is mandatory training for social work staff in the areas of equality and diversity and safeguarding children.

Fortnightly staff supervision takes place and there are fortnightly team meetings. Social workers in the fostering service have access to a good level of on going training provided by a training coordinator and are supported in undertaking higher social work qualifications. Intensive clinical supervision is provided for the social work team by the professionals in the therapy team. This improves practitioners' knowledge and support for young people.

The service's manager is a professionally-qualified registered social worker. This person has many years' experience in child care management and has an appropriate management qualification. On-going staff training and frequent supervision ensures that children receive good quality care from carers whose work is supervised by skilled professionals. Foster carers are trained and engaged in the agency's therapeutic approach and say that they feel part of a professional team. Support group meetings, training and information events are available for foster carers. This further ensures that children are cared for by an informed and professional service. The service's managers have developed a working relationship with other agencies, including placing authorities, police, education and health services. This ensures that there is a joint approach when assessing and meeting children's needs.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are clearly written, frequently reviewed and describe the service's aims and objectives. The children's guide is available in different formats that make it more accessible and inclusive for children below reading age, or who have a reading difficulty. The guides were produced in collaboration with young people. They are of an extremely high quality and provide an excellent information resource for young people. Young people can also access their own information page on the agency's website to keep them abreast of service developments and events. The agency arranges forum meetings for young people and there is an annual 'fun day' event for young people, carers and birth parents

which is enjoyed by all. These arrangements ensure that all stakeholders are kept well informed about service provision and development and add to the 'sense of family' that the agency promotes.

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.