

Asphaleia Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Diane Thackrah
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Date of last inspection	19/05/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Asphaleia Limited is a private fostering agency. There are 17 approved foster places in 10 fostering households. Long and short term fostering services are provided.

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 **good**.

This is an effective fostering agency where young people are supported to make good progress in their lives. Foster carers feel well supported and as a result, they are able to meet young people's needs effectively. High quality support is provided to sustain placements. For example, supervising social workers have low caseloads, which enable them to maintain high levels of contact with carers. Carers value this and are able to be strong advocates for young people as a result. Young people are positive about their foster families. Some say 'they are my family'.

There is thoughtful and careful selection of new carers and thorough assessments. This promotes the stability of placements. A focus on safeguarding runs through all the agency's functions. This means that young people feel safe and happy. While generally, there are robust checks on all new staff members which promote young people's welfare, improvements are required in relation to checking panel members' employment histories.

There have been difficulties in recruiting a new Registered Manager for the agency, despite strong efforts to do so. This has impacted on the panel, which has briefly been chaired by the agency's interim manager, who is not independent. Better access to legal advice and training is required for the panel. Despite this, the agency has continued to function effectively and professionally and to offer high quality support to carers and young people.

Leaders are committed to fostering. They have an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the service and take effective steps to improve it.

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
23 (2011)	constitute a fostering panel including a person to chair the panel who must be independent of the fostering service provider (Regulation 23 (4) (i))	13/01/2013
20 (2011)	ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to any person employed to work for the purpose of the fostering agency in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20)	13/01/2013
6 (2011)	appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 6 (1))	04/02/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure that the fostering panel has access to legal advice as required (NMS 14)
- ensure that each person on the central list is given the opportunity of attending an annual joint training day with the fostering service's fostering staff. (NMS 23.10)

Outcomes for children and young people

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

Young people are consulted with and their wishes influence their care. The agency is proactive in encouraging young people to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Staff talk to young people during supervision visits and before the carers' and looked-after children's reviews. This helps young people to feel valued and safe.

Young people are happy in their placements. There are child-friendly guides to each foster family, which are given to young people when they move in. Interpreters are used to help young people to settle in when English is not their first language. This means that young people can communicate freely and understand what is expected of them.

Young people make good progress in all aspects of their lives. A carer said that a young person has 'done brilliantly well through counselling and reassurance'. A stakeholder said of the agency, 'they manage young people with challenging needs very well'. Carers also say that young people develop a positive self-view and strong attachments. This promotes placement stability and in turn enhances young people's resilience. An independent reviewing officer said, 'the foster carers do treat the young person as part of the family'. They added, 'the young person has made good progress since being in placement'.

Young people understand how to lead healthy lifestyles and the need to avoid risks to their health. This gives them good opportunities to achieve and maintain good health into the future.

Young people, including those who are out of mainstream educational provision, are well supported to progress in education. A stakeholder said, 'the young person is encouraged and supported to achieve'. This helps to ensure that young people are not disadvantaged later in life.

Young people acquire skills which help them to plan for independence and lead successful adult lives. Some young people are able to remain with their carers in supported lodgings well past their 18th birthday. This has a very beneficial effect on outcomes for individual young people, because they can stay in the fostering family home until they are ready to move on. Some young people have helped to develop the agency's preparation for independence workbook. This has contributed to the book having a strong child-centred focus.

Young people are able to become actively and positively involved in activities in the community. This means that young people are part of their community and that they benefit and learn from new positive experiences.

Quality of service

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

Young people are placed with suitable families who can meet their needs. This is as a result of the robust recruitment practices which ensure that there are skilled foster carers available. Carers come from a range of ethnic backgrounds and this supports placements for young people with specific individual needs.

There is a thorough preparation and assessment process. This means that carers are supported to focus on the needs of young people very well. This also helps to ensure that unsuitable people do not become carers. There is a fostering panel that helps to promote safe, secure and stable placements. Panel members are experienced and well qualified to carry out their roles effectively. The most recent panel has functioned with a chair who is not independent of the agency. There are no arrangements yet for obtaining legal advice. There has been no training in the last two years for panel members and no appraisal. However, the impact of these shortfalls is minimal, as no legal advice has been necessary and no new assessments

have been brought to panel. All of the above issues have already been identified within the agency's developmental plans as requiring action.

The agency supports carers well. A carer said, 'there is always someone to talk to, even at 11pm'. Another said, 'as a growing organisation, my agency is generally very supportive'. There are monthly visits to carers' homes, which carers value. They say 'we can talk about anything'.

There is good access to training and the agency values carers' learning and development. This is reflected in the incentives for carers to attend training; for example, financial rewards, interesting and relevant subjects and staggered training times. A carer said, 'you can request training to look at specific issues'. As a result of this, carers are equipped to meet young people's needs.

There is a focus on understanding young people's needs and additional support is provided when needed; for example, increased home visits by supervising social workers. This helps to ensure that placements remain stable.

Safeguarding children and young people

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

Safeguarding young people is at the centre of all that the agency does. This means that young people feel safe and secure. Young people say that bullying is not a problem for them. They are confident that their carers will help to keep them safe. Young people know how to raise a concern. Child-friendly information regarding this is made available in the young people's guide and on the agency's web-site. Carers say they are given clear information from the agency about how to keep young people safe. One said, 'we had a discussion with the agency and the social worker, so we knew what to do if the young person went missing'. There is a focus on child protection in the new carers' induction programme. All of these measures help to keep young people safe.

There are unannounced visits to carers' homes once each year. This promotes young people's welfare by obtaining an accurate picture of the care provided. It is not common for young people to go missing from their foster homes. There are clear plans in place in relation to young people who do go missing. These are created in consultation with the local police and social workers; they help reduce the likelihood of young people going missing and reduce the risks when they do.

There is an open staff culture which helps to prevent unsuitable people from working with young people. Full checks have been carried out on the majority of staff who work for the agency and this helps to keep young people safe. However, full employment histories have not been obtained for some panel members. All other checks are in place for these individuals, so the impact of this shortfall is minimal.

Leadership and management

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

The leadership has a clear vision for young people and a focus on development. The agency has been without a Registered Manager for 18 months. This does not comply with regulation. However, the impact on service delivery is minimal. Carers feel well supported by the Registered Provider. There is an experienced and strong staff team and staff say that interim managerial cover has been effective in supporting them. The agency has taken the lack of a Registered Manager seriously and is making strong efforts to recruit a suitable candidate to this post.

There is vigorous and routine monitoring of the service, with a focus on outcomes. This includes weekly management meetings to review the agency's work. Carers feel valued and play a significant role in planning for young people and service development. They attend regular team meetings, which they value. One said, 'they do listen and follow through with what we say'.

Concerns are professionally handled and taken seriously by the agency. As a result, carers feel respected and maintain professional relationships with the agency. Furthermore, the agency learns from complaints made. The agency shares positive relationships with partner agencies, which helps to improve the care provided to young people. A commissioner said, 'They have sustained their quality. Their paper submission and delivery of service is very good.'

Stakeholders say that they enjoy working with the agency. An independent reviewing officer said of the service, 'they have addressed issues from the looked-after children review when asked to do so'.

The agency demonstrates an ability to sustain improvements, which supports high quality outcomes. There has been a positive approach to recommendations made at the last inspection. This means that carers have a better understanding of child protection. Also, case recording now more accurately demonstrates actual practice. As a result, young people's welfare is promoted.

The agency has a commitment to social workers' continuing professional development. Appraisal and supervision are key activities which support learning in the agency. As a result, staff are highly motivated and have a strong child-focussed approach to their work. Staff have training opportunities which helps to ensure that practice is based on up-to-date research. Generally, record keeping is good. Records are clear, up to date and stored securely. This promotes good quality child care and contributes to an understanding of a child's life.

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.