

SWAP Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC409413
Inspection date	07/11/2013
Inspector	Sharon Treadwell
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Date of last inspection	28/06/2011

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Service information

Brief description of the service

SWAP [Social Work Assessment Partners] is a private limited company and has been operating since 2005 as an Independent Social Work Consultancy providing social work services as its core business. Since 2010 it has been registered with Ofsted to provide an independent fostering service. The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers who provide fostering placements, for children and young people to a number of local authorities. A range of placement types are provided including: emergency, long, medium and short term and parent and child placements.

Currently 13 fostering households provide placements for 23 young people.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Since the previous inspection, in July 2011, the agency has grown from four to thirteen carer households and has relocated to larger office premises. This growth has been properly matched by an increase in social work staff.

The organisation's two directors operate as responsible individual and Registered Manager and they maintain visible and effective leadership and oversight of agency practice. This is a dedicated and child-centred staff team. They demonstrate a strong commitment to ensuring that placements with this agency's carers are good

experiences for young people, which promote positive outcomes, supporting them to achieve to their full potential and to develop social and emotional stability. Young people are making significant progress, are enjoying life, acquiring new skills and being well supported to move forward towards independence. One young person sums up the difference to their life as: 'There's no stronger bond in life than family and now I really feel part of one.'

Development plans have consistently been, and still are, achievable and realistic. Both carers and staff feel that they have had, and continue to have, an active role in the development of this service and say: 'In this service everyone's opinion is valued.' Foster carers strongly feel part of the team around the child. They are integral to placement planning and particularly to facilitating the engagement of young people, with therapeutic input, to help those young people move forward from damaging and often abusive experiences.

The development of this agency, since the last inspection has been strongly people-focused and the development of systems, processes and recording practices have been neglected. There are no regulatory shortfalls but eight recommendations have been made and these reflect the need for the agency to implement systems and recording practices to properly demonstrate some of its positive achievements. The manager is aware of these shortfalls and they have certainly not impacted on the level of support carers receive or on the good quality care provided to young people to promote their development and keep them safe.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- demonstrate a more pro-active approach to following up shortfalls in information provided by placing authorities to help carers understand and predict young people's behaviours and support young people within their households. This specifically relates to escalating requests for information, beyond placing social workers, where requests or timely provision of essential documents are not met (NMS 11.2; NMS 3.9)
- ensure that all foster carers are given the maximum appropriate flexibility to take decisions relating to children in their care, that they understand what decision making capacity they have, and that this is clearly recorded (NMS 7.7; Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.10)
- review the agency's policy on approving carers who are smokers to provide placements for children aged under 5 years, taking into consideration the potential impact on children's physical health. Ensure that this review takes full account of the Fostering Network guidance relating to carer smoking (NMS 6.1)
- ensure that minutes of fostering panel meetings clearly cover the key issues identified by panel members, specifically issues for clarification or of concern, and

that they demonstrate that such issues have been fully addressed. The minutes must reflect panel chair approval (NMS 14.7)

- ensure that, when exemptions to the normal fostering limit are applied for and granted, under Schedule 7 of the Children Act 1989, that a certificate of exemption is provided to the carers and a copy placed on their records to demonstrate that appropriate consideration has been given to the needs of all young people in placement and to identify any conditions to which the exemption is subject (NMS 15.1; Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.49)
- instigate clear arrangements for foster carers to routinely receive independent support during the investigation of allegations and ensure that foster carers are fully aware of what these arrangements are (NMS 22.12)
- ensure that all entries in agency records are always signed and dated (NMS 26.5)
- review record keeping practices to ensure that records relating to young people and foster carers always contain relevant and current information. Young people's records must contain a copy of the current care plan and must clearly evidence young people's starting points when placed and the progress made in terms of education, health and social skill development during their placement, thus contributing to a clear understanding of the child's life (NMS 26, NMS 31.2).

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

A number of young people are in stable placements, which have been confirmed, or are currently being given consideration as, their permanent placements. This helps young people to feel safe, stable and settled. There are instances where young people have moved on to special guardianship orders with their carers to confirm their permanence and where carers have successfully moved young people on to adoption. The sense of family belonging, which this agency promotes well, is further evidenced by the number of young people who, having moved on to independence, continue to visit their carers regularly: a foster carer said, 'and he brings his washing every week.'

Carers and young people are predominantly white British. Initial matching gives careful consideration to young people's individual needs, including those in respect of race, religion, language and cultural heritage. There are some good examples of young people being very well matched to placements, which are meeting their needs extremely well. As a result their behaviours are improving, as is their quality of life, as they begin to make real progress in education, receive sound input to improve their physical and mental health and are being exposed to positive life and leisure experiences. One young person commented: 'I really like school now and they really like me.' This has happened as his presentation, behaviour, attendance, punctuality and achievement have progressively improved.

There have, however, been a number of unplanned endings since the previous

inspection. There were seven during 2011/2012, which is high in comparison to the national average. These are always upsetting, negative experiences for young people. Three of the children concerned were brothers and sisters and those children were subsequently placed, very successfully, with another of the agency's carers and have since made real progress. The change of placement was achieved swiftly because agency staff quickly realised that the initial match was inappropriate in terms of meeting their needs. The agency has learnt lessons from these placement disruptions, about the reliability of initial information from some of its placing authority partners, and has significantly reduced the incidence of placement breakdown. They quickly recognised that the initial matching of these placements had been informed by inaccurate information, and are now more cautious with referrals from those partners.

Young people speak very positively about their experience of fostering with this agency's carers: 'We have lots of fun and go out to lots of places and I like it because my friends come for dinner and my play room has lots of toys'; 'I like going to the park and finding frogs and I love my cats and I am safe and I love all my family'; 'I like that I feel at home whilst I've been living here and I like that we all muck in as a family and have a laugh and all get along.'

Many young people are receiving a therapeutic input to help them to move on from abusive and destructive previous experiences and their carers are really helping them to learn to value and protect themselves. Young people have been helped to do this through getting proper basic health input, such as glasses for a young person whose progress was being impaired because he could not see properly, and encouragement and support to attend school. Young people thrive because of this input and say: 'I like doing my homework with... (carer's daughter) and I like the food here. .. (carer) is the bestest cook in the world, I love her, she is my best friend.'

Young people get good information, about what being fostered with SWAP will be like, from the children's guide and the young people's guide. These guides also provide them with understandable information about how to complain if they are unhappy. Foster carers prepare a written profile of their household, with photographs, and, wherever possible, these are shared with young people before they are placed so that they know something about the family home they are moving into.

Young people have good informal opportunities to say what they do and do not like about being fostered. Supervising social workers regularly speak with young people when they visit carers to ask them what they think about their placements. There are some good examples of young people being supported to have their wishes implemented, for example where an adoption placement of brothers and sisters broke down and they expressed a wish to return to a previous foster carer where they had been happy. Young people have helped staff to design the newsletter and they are making contributions to it. They have been involved in staff interviews and older children are supported to complete a 'wishes and feelings' questionnaire, before their looked after children reviews to reflect their views about their placements. The agency regularly stages activity days to bring carers, their own

children and fostered children together and this promotes the 'family feel' and 'team spirit' that carers say helps young people to make positive progress. As it grows the agency is working on the development of more formal consultation processes and is looking to establish a consultation group of looked after and carers' own children so that it can better show how young people's views influence agency development.

Young people's progress within their placements is recognised by their placing social workers: 'The child's needs in terms of health are significant and the carers manage these complexities very well with a great deal of insight and commitment'; 'She attends special school and this is extremely well supported by the carers who have a strong working relationship with the school.'

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carer assessments are of very good quality. They are evaluative and insightful and give thorough consideration to potential foster carers' skills and abilities and their capacity to provide positive placements for young people. The fostering panel retains good oversight of the quality of assessments and shares any concerns with the agency. This is a small agency and agency staff know all the young people placed very well. They have extremely sound knowledge of young people's histories and individual needs and this promotes a very robust oversight of carers' capacity to meet those needs in a consistent and effective way. Since the previous inspection the agency has grown from four to thirteen carers. Initially the carer population was entirely white British but the agency currently has carers undergoing assessment from other ethnic groups. Growth in carer numbers has been properly matched by increased staffing levels and the agency now employs two supervising social workers and has recently appointed an administrator. The agency has recently moved to a larger office to accommodate the larger staff team and provide better facilities for carer meetings and training. Managers, staff, carers and associated professionals all feel that this is a very child-centred agency. Staff say: 'Young people are at the centre here. If the carers are looked after and supported well by us then they provide better holistic care to young people'; 'We monitor the child's journey well through strong and supportive relationships with our carers.'

Foster carers receive a high level of support from their supervising social workers and value this saying: 'My supervising social worker is absolutely great. Whenever I ring her she always gets back to me. We get 100% support all the time from SWAP.' All carers receive monthly visits, as a minimum, and supervision focuses on the how the needs of young people are being met and on the carer's individual development and support needs. Regular, unannounced visits, which are undertaken twice year, more frequently if there are any concerns, look carefully at carers' continuing capacity to meet young people's needs and at young people's satisfaction with their care. Matching is robust with the agency completing a comprehensive matching form to detail consideration of carer skills and experience against the stated needs of young people referred for placement. Where any potential shortfalls in matching are noted, good consideration is given to how gaps will be addressed. Where there are

potentially specific cultural needs a heritage assessment considers how these needs will be met.

Carer training is of good quality, regular and relevant and supports carers well in meeting young people's identified needs. Carers value the training they receive saying: 'I really enjoyed the course, it was informative and well presented', 'absolutely fab training', 'I learned so much that I will use with the children.' All carers have either completed the Children's Workforce Development Standards (CWDC) or are currently undertaking the Training Development Standards, which replaced the CWDC. Carer support groups are an open forum for sharing skills, knowledge and information and are held monthly. The agency also has a website and 'facebook' page where information is shared with carers and young people. Both the support group and training sessions are very well attended. Carers are encouraged to begin to attend support groups and training whilst they are going through the approval process. This helps them to begin to make supportive links with other carers and develop their skills and knowledge.

The agency generally has good working relationships with placing authorities. Commissioning officers speak positively about the agency's capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to placement referrals saying: 'This agency has provided some effective placements, especially more recently in respect of parent and child placements, and these have been very successful.' Placing social workers comment positively on the capacity of placements to meet young people's needs. A placing social worker made the following comment about a carer who had moved a young person on successfully into an adoptive placement: '...is so enthusiastic about her new home and where she wants to go with her life. I would like to say that the valuable work and support that her foster carers and other workers involved have given her is so evident in her. They should be really proud of what they have achieved in what is a relatively short time in a young person's life.'

The agency recognises and values the work of its carers. The manager sent the following comment to a carer: 'Thank you for the wonderful child-centred work you have done with....The loving, caring, supportive home environment you have both provided for her is evident and you should both be proud of the difference you have made in her life.'

The agency has discussed delegated authority with its carers and placing authorities and, for some young people there is good clarity about foster carers being able to make day-to-day decisions about young people's care. Not all carers, however, have a good grasp of what decisions they are able to make without reference to the child's placing social worker and agency staff are not always good at recording their discussions about this. Where placing authorities are reluctant to give carers appropriate decision making capacity the agency is not always robust enough in challenging this as not being in the young people's best interests. Similarly, where placing authorities are slow to respond to requests for the provision of essential documents and information to help carers, social workers are not recording their efforts to chase its provision. There is insufficient demonstration that requests for provision of essential documents are escalated to management level when initial

requests are not met in a timely way.

Until April this year this agency had clear stance that would not place children under five years of age with carers who smoked. The agency has taken too much account of some of its placing authority's decisions to relax their own policies in relation to carer smoking and has reviewed and relaxed its own policy to fit with this. This has huge implications for the physical development and well-being of children placed and does not accord with the Fostering Network brief. At present no young people are at risk because of this policy change. The agency must consider the wisdom of changing its own policy to accord with that of some of its placing authorities.

The agency has established solid working relationships with a range of partner agencies, such as the child and adolescent mental health services, the police and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. This ensures that staff are able to secure relevant advice for carers and to help inform planning for additional professional input young people may require.

The fostering panel membership reflects a good balance in terms of gender, ethnicity and experience. Overall panel minutes are comprehensive, but because they are written as a verbatim account of panel discussion, key issues are difficult to identify. Strengths are clearly summarised but issues for clarification or potential weaknesses are not always well highlighted. The reasons for the panel's recommendations are not well summarised making it difficult for the agency decision maker to make an informed decision. The panel chair does not sign panel minutes to confirm their accuracy.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency has a clear and comprehensive safeguarding policy, which has been approved by the local safeguarding board. Both staff and foster carers receive regular child protection and safeguarding training. This makes sure that they are fully aware of their reporting and recording responsibilities should young people engage in behaviours, which place them at risk, or should they make an allegation. Carers have recently received training on sexual exploitation and child trafficking to increase their awareness of the type of risk young people may potentially be exposed to. Carers demonstrate sound awareness of how negative and abusive experiences can impact on young people's attitudes, behaviours and capacity to trust adults and talk confidently about the sensitivity needed to help young people move forward from such experiences.

Both placing authorities and the Local Authority Designated Officer say that the agency has worked co-operatively with them, where safeguarding concerns have arisen, and has always prioritised the safety and welfare of young people. Records demonstrate that the agency reports concerns in a timely and proper manner. Complaints and allegations are competently managed in a timely and efficient way. There has been one complaint since the previous inspection. The issues identified by

the complainant were comprehensively addressed through training and enhanced support for the carer who was the subject of the complaint. Where there have been allegations against carers the agency has properly arranged independent support for those carers. However the agency does not currently have any formal arrangement for carer membership of any professional body, which would routinely provide a range of support services for carers in this position. While the carers have expressed a lack of confidence in such organisations, the agency must consider the potential vulnerability of its carers whilst such support systems are not in place.

Young people feel safe in their placements and they say: 'I love being fostered as I don't like mummy because she was nasty to me. My foster carer keeps me safe better'; 'I love being safe and all my pink things and I love painting and going to lots of places with my foster carer.' Some young people have felt safe and stable enough with their foster carers to be able to disclose previous experiences of abuse. Where this has happened carers have been able to support those young people well to engage in therapeutic work and to develop better self-care and personal safety awareness. Young people have been helped to overcome symptoms of abuse, such as enuresis, encopresis, night terrors and a fear of adults by their carers working as a team with social workers and health professionals.

Recruitment procedures for staff and carers are robust and protect young people from exposure to unsuitable adults. Individualised safe care policies are in place for all young people. These are supported by individual risk assessments, completed alongside the matching form when young people are initially placed, detailing any potentially unsafe behaviours young people have the propensity to display and how risks will be minimised within their foster home. Carers have a sound awareness of the need for young people to be supported to take age-appropriate risks and risk assessments do not prevent young people from engaging in a wide range of sporting and leisure activities. The agency provides placements for young people who have complex needs and some challenging behaviours and placing authorities value the carers' capacity to sustain these commenting: 'It is greatly to the carer's credit that she has managed to sustain this placement of all three children and keep them together and manage the challenges and high level of commitment so well.'

The agency has clear policies and procedures, which are carefully followed where young people go missing from the foster home. There have been no instances of this since late 2011, even though some young people placed have previously demonstrated a propensity to behave in this way. This indicates that young people are happy in their placements, are able to talk issues through with their carers and so do not need to run away.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Day-to-day management of the fostering service is robust and effective. Staff and carers have full confidence in the manager who they describe as 'really accessible and supportive'; 'always available for advice and to share his knowledge' and

'approachable, fair and open minded'. This is a small agency and both carers and staff feel that they have had, and continue to have, an active role in the development of the service. Development plans have consistently been, and still are, achievable and realistic. The agency has grown progressively and the directors confirm that their intention is not to exceed twenty carer households. The agency's accountants confirm its continuing financial viability.

The agency's Statement of Purpose, dated May 2013, is an extremely comprehensive document and provides good information about how young people's needs will be met and positive outcomes promoted. There is full information about what services are provided and about processes for recruitment, approval, support and training of carers. It provides very full and relevant detail for associated professionals and service users.

Equality and diversity has a high profile, with relevant training for carers and staff, a focus on individuality and practices, which challenge discrimination. There are good examples of carers promoting young people's individuality and heritage, both through facilitating effective contact with their birth families and through engaging in learning and development to enhance their own knowledge about cultural norms and variations.

The agency is commendably child-centred. There is a real focus, within carers' supervision and support, and in the manager's supervision of staff, on identifying how carers are promoting positive achievements for the young people in their care.

The development of this agency, since the last inspection has been strongly people-focused. The manager is very much a part of front line service delivery. He is fully aware of the strengths and skills of all the carers and meets with them regularly. He knows all the young people in placement and is knowledgeable about what progress each of them has made during their placements. He supervises all staff and maintains good oversight of their management of their workload. Staff meetings are consistently used for reflection on what could be improved to enhance outcomes for young people. The development of systems, processes and recording practices to enable the agency to properly demonstrate some of its positive achievements has been neglected.

The manager regularly monitors the operation of the service and effectively uses this monitoring to improve service delivery. He achieves this because of his in-depth working knowledge of the service and his demonstrated commitment to continuously improving young people's fostering experiences. Records do not support him well with this. The agency has no established system to effectively demonstrate the real progress young people make during their placements. Information about young people's starting point at admission and subsequent achievements in terms of educational attendance and progress, improvements in health and development of social skills can only really be confirmed by trawling through daily records and records of looked after children reviews. Many tasks, such as chasing outstanding information from placing authorities, are undertaken routinely by social workers and are not recorded. Where the agency has, very appropriately, requested an exemption

to the normal fostering limit for carers there is only email confirmation that this has been granted. The agency has not followed up the issuing of a certificate of exemption. This means that there is no indication, on the carer's records, of the conditions of that exemption or timescale for review. Minutes of meetings, such as the fostering panel and team meetings, are generally not a good reflection of business discussed. Records relating to carers and young people are disorganised, for example records of looked after children reviews are sometimes in the carer's file and sometimes in the young person's. Some young people's files do not contain a copy of their current care plan, although carers confirm that they have a copy. Documents, such as safe care policies, are not always signed and dated making it difficult to confirm that they are current.

The manager is fully aware of these shortfalls and they have certainly not impacted on the level of support carers receive or on the good quality care provided to young people to promote their development. The manager is particularly aware of the need to develop the agency's capacity to properly evidence young people's starting points and progressive achievements during their placements. The agency has recently appointed an administrator. Previously all administrative tasks were undertaken by the manager and social work staff. The administrator is already developing pro-forma recording tools to promote consistency in recording practices and is working to implement more effective and systematic filing practices. The administrator has a social work qualification and background, which enhances her capacity to appreciate the need for young people's records to contribute effectively to an understanding of their life in care.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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 the inspection of independent fostering agencies.