

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Mark Blesky
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd is an independent fostering agency that has been registered since 2004.

As the time of the inspection, the fostering service had 40 approved places, with 22 places filled. The agency provides permanent long-term foster care, short-term foster care; emergency foster care, parent and child foster care and short break foster care.

The agency's 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.

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: **inadequate**.

This relatively small fostering service operates with two full-time supervising social workers and one part-time supervising social worker. In many ways this service runs like a family business and has been described in this way by both staff and foster carers.

While this provides the service with a more intimate and less formal identity, it has led to some systems being fragmented and in some examples, ineffective. Indeed, the closeness and intimacy have enabled many carers and young people to feel engaged and valued as 'part of the family'. However, systems that are currently running largely on goodwill have failed where carers are less motivated and committed. Although these instances may be few, this has led to young people not being appropriately safeguarded and their welfare not sufficiently promoted.

When carers are less engaged and cooperative, the agency has not acted decisively and promptly. This has in some cases allowed placements to have been sustained beyond their suitability. Some placements have subsequently broken down and young people have not been safeguarded.

Where carers are committed, focused and engaged with the agency, young people have been supported appropriately. Where support has been identified to promote education or health, this again has been appropriately addressed. However, the internal monitoring by the agency is not currently adequate.

Carers and staff demonstrate a commitment and determination to provide good care and the Registered Manager and Responsible Individual acknowledge the shortfalls found during this inspection. Where carers were spoken to they described the agency as very supportive, approachable and committed to the young people. Young people spoken to felt valued and well looked after and in some cases able to describe how their life had improved.

Social workers and local authorities spoken to also echoed examples of good practice and some social workers spoke about the agencies willingness to "go the extra mile". Another social worker stated 'They (staff) often attend meetings with the carers and always go beyond their role as social workers.'

There are examples of good practice within the service. However, it is the areas where practice is inadequate and young people are not safeguarded that are of most concern. The agency's matching practice is insufficiently structured.

Throughout this inspection, the management and staff have been open and transparent and acknowledged the concerns. This has enabled this inspection to focus effectively on the areas of most need.

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
3 (2011)	produce a written guide to the fostering service, a children's guide, which includes a summary of the representations and complaints procedure and the address, including email address, and telephone number of the Chief Inspector (Regulation 3 (3)(b)&(c))	31/12/2013
18 (2011)	establish a written procedure for complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency and the procedure to be made known to children placed by the agency (Regulation 18 (2)(b)(e))	31/12/2013
11 (2011)	ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times (Regulation 11 (a))	31/12/2013
15 (2011)	promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents and has access to such medical, dental, nursing, psychological and psychiatric advice, treatment and other services as the child may require and is provided with guidance, support and advice on health, personal care and health promotion issues appropriate to the child's needs and wishes (Regulation 15 (1)(2)(b&d))	31/12/2013
28 (2011)	ensure that a carers review takes place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year (Regulation 28 (2))	31/12/2013
20 (2011)	establish effective recruitment practices to determine that a person is considered not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20 (3))	31/12/2013
21 (2011)	ensure that all persons employed receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal, and are enabled from time to time to obtain further qualifications appropriate to the work they perform. (Regulation 21 (4) (a&b))	31/12/2013

Recommendations

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

- ensure that prior to the placement of each child, the foster carer is provided with all the information held by the fostering service that they need to carry out their role effectively. The information is provided in a clear, comprehensive written form and includes the support that will be available to the foster carer. The fostering service follows up with the responsible authority any gaps in the information provided to them on the child or the child's family, which may hinder the foster carer in providing a safe caring environment that meets the child's needs and enables them to keep the child, other children in the fostering

household and the foster carer him/herself safe. (NMS 15.2)

- ensure that the Children's Guide includes a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children, how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their Independent Reviewing Officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that the fostering panel provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel (NMS 14.2)
- ensure that the fostering service ensures there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence (NMS 12.3)
- establish and fully implement, a written education policy that promotes and values children's education and is understood by foster carers (NMS 8.5)
- ensure that there is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes induction, post-qualifying and in-service training, that staff and volunteers are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service (NMS 23.1)
- ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. The service's decision-maker should review the performance of the panel chair. Views about the chair's performance should be sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings (Volume 4, Statutory Guidance, paragraph 5.15)
- ensure that in reaching a decision or making a qualifying determination, the decision maker should consider *Hofstetter v LB Barnet* and *IRM [2009] EWCA 328 (Admin)*, in which the court set out guidance for the way in which the decision maker should approach a case, whether it is a decision based on the agency panel's recommendation. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.40)

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

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

Most young people are generally well looked after and safe. However, practices and

systems to enable young people to stay safe are inadequate in a number of cases. In these examples young people's welfare is not being adequately promoted or safeguarded.

While carers provide effective behaviour control, a small number of carers have not managed behaviour appropriately, this poor behaviour management has led to safeguarding concerns and placement breakdown.

Systems to monitor and manage safe recruitment and employment are not effective. Unsafe recruitment practices place young people in the position where they may come into contact or be influenced by unsuitable people.

Staff members, panel members and carers are not being effectively trained. Young people's progress in foster care is less likely to be successful when those looking after them or making decisions for them are not being trained and supported in their professional development.

Young people attend core health services regularly, such as doctors, dentists and opticians. This is monitored through the agency's monthly visits to the foster carers' homes. As a result, young people are healthy. In addition, young people are supported by guidance from their carers to establish and maintain healthy lifestyles. However, in some cases neither the carers nor the agency have medical consent for young people's medical treatment. This may leave young people unable to receive both routine and emergency treatments promptly.

Young people feel part of the family and valued by the carers. Young people have opportunities to engage in hobbies and interests and say that they are supported in doing this. Young people say they have a voice and they can express their wishes and feelings and these are acted upon by the carers. A recent day out to a theme park for several foster families was as a result of young people expressing their wishes.

Young people feel able to complain and to raise concerns if they are unhappy. However, young people's guides do not make this process very clear, which may inhibit the effectiveness of the complaints and representations process. In addition, the agency's general complaints procedures do not include guidance for the person making the complaint, in accordance with the fostering regulations.

Young people are supported to achieve the goals within their care plans. However, the receipt of the minutes of statutory reviews in some cases is significantly delayed and this leaves young people less likely to be supported towards reaching their goals in the reviewed care plan. The agency has no formal system for chasing reviews, but it is acknowledged that a system is already being developed.

The agency celebrates educational achievement and attendance and carers often provide effective support for young people. However, while the agency records attendance and educational achievements, it does not consistently monitor and promote education. The current systems in place do not consistently capture the

progress young people are making or identify areas of shortfall. This means that it is difficult to gain a sense of progress, a key element in promoting learning. The Registered Manager recognises this and systems are already being completed to address the issue.

However, where the need for educational support has been identified, the agency then works hard to provide this support. For example, young people have benefitted from home tutors and support with their learning by agency staff. The service has provided a classroom to support education programmes and has effectively supported progress.

Some of the young people that are approaching adulthood are being assessed for support with learning skills for adulthood, but there are no completed plans in place. Young people need to be effectively supported and engaged by the agency and their carers to learn and develop the skills that they will need to support themselves in adult life.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **inadequate.**

The service maintains and regularly reviews the Statement Of Purpose which describes the services and support that is provided to young people. A range of foster carers are provided and mostly supported through training and supervision to meet the diverse needs of the young people.

While training is successful in many cases, providing carers with enhanced knowledge and understanding of young people, some carers are less engaged in training. This leaves some carers less able to understand the needs of the young people. The agency has not developed effective systems to evaluate the effectiveness of their training or drive the delivery of this training for all carers.

Most foster carers receive regular supervision and this gives them the opportunity to discuss the progress of the young person's placement. Carers feel supported by this regular contact and use this support effectively. This has enabled carers to gain confidence and make good decisions and plans for the young people. Where foster carers are engaged in training and supervision, they form and sustain effective relationships with the agency and they understand the expectations of the fostering role.

However, some carers are less cooperative with supervision and this leaves them less engaged in the progress of the young person's care and their own development. While it is acknowledged that the agency has made efforts to engage some carers in both training and supervision, these efforts have not always been effective.

Young people speak positively about the agency and meet often with the supervising social workers. They feel that their opinions and views are valued. Young people say that they can approach the agency and raise any matters that concern them or

trouble them. This has been achieved by regular meetings between the agency's supervising social workers and the young people. These meetings enable young people to form a close relationship with the agency and provide them with opportunities to influence their care.

Foster carers understand the importance of young people feeling part of the family and having the opportunity to express their wishes and feelings. The agency promotes these relationships and develops innovative strategies for young people and foster carers to come together and enjoy days out and other activities. This results in young people meeting one another and enjoying the company of their peers.

The fostering panel does not currently operate effectively. There are no formal quality assurance functions performed by the panel. Panel members do not receive any supervision or evaluation of their performance. The training and expertise of panel members is not appraised and the agency has not ascertained if panel members continue to develop their professional skills and maintain these skills in their respective roles.

The chair and vice-chair do not have a quality assurance function. In addition, their performance is also not appraised. This leaves a panel without any quality assurance oversight. In the absence of effective quality assurance, the agency is unable to establish if the panel's performance is competent to promote safe, secure and stable placements.

There is further concern that the Registered Manager is also the agency decision maker. The Registered Manager supports and coaches supervising social workers to improve their reports and assessments. In this role, the Registered Manager shapes and influences the report to be presented to panel. Subsequently, when the Registered Manager acts in the role of agency decision maker, she evaluates and make decisions on what is effectively their own report, or a report that she has co-authored. This practice is not objective and cannot provide a quality assurance function. It is also likely that panel members know that the report they are being presented with has already been agreed by the Registered Manager, and as a consequence, it is likely to be agreed by the same person in their role as agency decision maker.

Foster carers often work well with placing social workers and their authorities and carers are well prepared and knowledgeable of the young people that they provide care for. Carers say they feel valued by the agency and think of it as part of a wider family. It is acknowledged that relationships between the carers, the young people in placement and the agency are well established. These relationships are beneficial; they promote co-operation and effective working together. However, these relationships may have allowed systems that are more informal to have become embedded in practice, resulting in a greater reliance on goodwill between the agency and its carers. In some cases, this has resulted in carers that need a greater level of direction being inadequately supervised.

Matching provides a formal process for assessing the needs of the young people and the skills of the carer to meet these needs. Matching has resulted in some placements been effective and sustained for a number of years, which is providing young people with stable and beneficial placements.

However, the referral process prior to matching is weak and does not address salient aspects of the young person such as their culture, religion or disability. Also, there is no internal matching system for young people moving between the carers in the agency. This may leave elements that are important to the success of the placement unclear to carers and consequently, there is limited support for the carers and the young people. The agency is developing information for young people prior to their move into new foster placements.

Placement breakdown levels have recently been high and in several cases these have resulted from some conflict within the foster carers' home. Higher incidences of breakdowns suggest that matching is not always effective. It is noted that the agency has not yet carried out any assessment to establish any factors that may have contributed to, or indeed avoided these breakdowns. Breakdowns in placements result in young people's plans and their lives being disrupted. Each breakdown is detrimental to young people's welfare.

Statutory reviews of young people's plans are conducted within appropriate timescales. However, in many cases, the agency does not chase the subsequent review panel minutes. This leaves foster carers and the agency without the opportunity to implement any changes to plans or to the placement. In the absence of young people's reviews, young people's needs are less likely to be met and their welfare is not promoted effectively.

These identified shortfalls across a number of areas within the quality of care, fail to promote and safeguard young people's welfare.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

Young people say they feel safe and well looked after and trust their foster carers. Young people are confident to raise a complaint if they feel bullied or victimised and believe that their carers will respond appropriately. In addition, young people feel that the agency can also be contacted and would provide them with support.

Young people have regular, monthly contact with the agency when the home is visited by the supervising social worker and young people value this support. Young people say that this is an opportunity to speak freely to the social worker and raise any matters that they wish.

To help keep young people safe, risk assessments are conducted to minimise risk for young people or reduce risk-taking behaviours. Carers are aware of the importance of protecting young people from harm and keeping them safe. Carers use their training and supervision to develop their risk assessment skills and develop their

awareness.

Young people do not regularly go missing and when they do, the agency deploys effective out-of-hours and duty support. The agency has developed a running away and missing from home care protocol and they are aware of the expectations of placing authorities and the importance of effective communication with them. When young people go missing, they are returned promptly and both the carers and agency discuss this behaviour with them. This allows young people to share any concerns or difficulties that may have influenced them to go missing.

While carers safeguard and promote young people's welfare, there are examples in two households where appropriate safeguarding in relation to young people's welfare and going missing has failed. These failures by the carers left young people unsafe and failed to promote and safeguard their welfare. In both these cases, the agency subsequently failed to take the necessary action to fully address these matters. This resulted in the foster carers not been appropriately challenged in respect of their practice and safeguarding reporting procedures were not followed through.

Panel members' recruitment and vetting is not thorough. Panel members have not been recruited appropriately, leaving many examples where panel members do not have sufficient references, employment checks and identification checks. This leaves recruitment unsafe in establishing robust and rigorous checks on these employees.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **inadequate**.

The Registered Manager is a qualified social worker and is supported by a senior social worker, who is also qualified. The Responsible Individual is also in day-to-day charge of the fostering agency and they are also sufficiently qualified and trained.

Relationships between the agency and placing social workers have been developed and sustained in many cases for a number of years. Regular and open communication is generally well maintained.

Leadership within the agency is in many ways less formal and this appears effective in maintaining and developing relationships with foster carers and young people. As a result, young people and foster carers contact the agency regularly and visit the agency freely. This informal relationship has resulted in young people, their carers and the agency, planning and arranging many activities, programmes and support effectively. Relationships are valued and young people and carers feel engaged.

However, formal and structured systems are less evident. Leadership and management have therefore been most effective with carers that need less direction and guidance. This has left carers that are less experienced or motivated inadequately managed. The agency accepts that it has struggled to engage and supervise these carers.

Some systems are in place to measure the quality of the service in terms of the carers' and young people's satisfaction. However, current systems have not been effective in directing focus on areas that have been left unsafe or less well-managed.

The agency's Statement Of Purpose and young people's guide details the services that are available to young people. However, the young people's guide does not have the contact information for Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted. Also the children's guide does not effectively communicate the agency's complaint procedures in sufficient detail and in accordance with the fostering regulations. This may leave young people less inclined to raise complaints.

The agency has not yet adopted the Foster Carers' Charter or consulted with the carers in relation to this. This Charter aims to enable foster carers to make day-to-day decisions and provide young people with a home that more accurately reflects the family. In the absence of this Charter, young people and their carers may have more limited opportunities to develop their relationships with one another.

Foster carers are not currently using opportunities to develop their learning effectively and there are many examples where foster carers have failed to complete necessary training within their first year of employment. This leaves a workforce less skilled and qualified to fulfil their roles, promoting young people's needs. Current leadership and management have not been effective in promoting training and have failed to address carers that are reluctant or unable to engage in necessary training.

In addition, training for social work staff has not been well-managed. For example, training to develop social workers' professional practice have not been planned or implemented. This has left some social work staff without training for a significant amount of time. Social workers have therefore not been able to maintain their post-qualifying training and learning. This leaves social work staff less able to keep up to date with current good practice and current legislation and guidance.

Supervision for social workers is effective where it identifies their day-to-day work supporting foster carers and the placement. There are examples of practice discussions and effective support for social workers.

However, supervision has not been effective in identifying the specific training and developmental needs for staff. The supervision process therefore also leaves staff members without appropriate support for this continued professional development. Training for panel members has also been poorly managed.

It is acknowledged that notifications have been made when significant events have taken place.

However, some local authority designated officers or out-of-hours services have not been notified in relation to significant events. Notifications relating to the protection of children fostered by the service were therefore not always made. The failure to notify the authorities does not safeguard or promote young people's welfare.

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.