

# SWIIS Foster Care Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	06/07/2011

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The fostering agency is part of a large private limited company which has eight fostering agencies registered with Ofsted. This agency is currently their largest and provides for 157 children and young people at the time of inspection. There are 169 carers and 95 carer households. The volume of recruitment between June 2013 and June 2014 is 29 carers across 17 carer households. The range of fostering service provided includes short and long-term placements for children and young people between the ages of 0-21 years. Foster placements are provided from diverse backgrounds that reflect the demographic population of the region. Assessment of prospective foster carers and the annual review of carers is usually undertaken by independent staff under contract. The fostering agency uses its own recruitment arm of the business to source social work and support staff.

### 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**.

The fostering agency ensures that children and young people make good progress and achieve positive outcomes. A particular strength lies in the direct support provided to children and young people by the agency's professional support staff. This support is tailored specifically to children and young people's most pressing presenting need, and includes direct help with education, health, life story work and emotional and behavioural difficulties. Combined with this is a programme of regular,

good quality group activities which enable children and young people to enjoy themselves and rise to new challenges. As a result, children and young people enjoy stable placements and progress well. The rate of unplanned placement endings is therefore lower than the national average.

The recruitment, preparation and training of foster carers results in a very skilled range of carers who meet children's needs well. The system of using independent social workers to assess new carers and chair the annual review of approved carers works seamlessly with the agency. A particular strength lies in the quality of training and the supportive, challenging relationships provided by the agency's support and supervising staff. Managers, staff and carers alike share an enthusiasm for continuous improvement and keeping up to date with current practice and research findings. As a result, foster carers work in a professional way and demonstrate insight, empathy and skill in their relationships with children and young people.

The agency succeeds in ensuring that children and young people's views and experiences are central to everything it does. This is particularly apparent in the agency's robust safeguarding practice. Allegations and complaints are carefully and transparently dealt with in accordance with both agency and local authority child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures. Equally, children and young people whose risk taking behaviour makes them vulnerable are kept safe. This is because carers practice safely, deploy their training, and work openly with all other professionals. As a result, children and young people are safe and their welfare is always the primary concern.

Children and young people, carers, staff, and placing local authorities consistently express confidence in the leadership and management of the agency. Leaders and managers demonstrate child centred, inclusive and empathic qualities that underpin their well organised and effective monitoring and placement planning. This minimised the impact of organisational streamlining during 2012 when some education support and social work staff moved on. A particular strength lies in the knowledge and availability of the Registered Manager to advise, oversee and monitor all aspects of the agency's work.

However, four practice shortfalls are identified within the otherwise very good quality service. These shortfalls do not have an adverse impact on children and young people.

## **Areas for improvement**

### **Recommendations**

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

- ensure that all members of a household who are approved foster carers are supported to achieve the Children's Workforce Development standards for foster care (NMS 20.2)
- ensure that children have access to independent advice and support from adults

who they can contact directly and in private about problems or concerns. This is with particular respect to their Independent Reviewing Officer (NMS 1.5)

- extend the procedures for introducing children into the foster placement so that they have more understanding of what to expect from living in the foster home. This includes planned, emergency and immediate foster care placements (NMS 11.1)
- improve the effectiveness of systems for monitoring children's outcomes in order to satisfy yourselves that good outcomes for all children are being achieved. (NMS 25.7(b))

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people settle well with their carers even though the majority are placed with carers at short notice. Children often know only key facts about their carers before they arrive, but many carers use their 'family book' to help children familiarise themselves with the household on arrival. Where possible and appropriate, some children benefit from lengthy introductions to their carers. By far the majority of children settle well and are very positive about their carers. Many children are placed with their brothers and sisters and/or are well supported to have enjoyable contact with them. A brother and sister commented recently, 'I will stay here - I love this place!' 'I will never leave here - I love it too much.' Overall, good matching with good quality carers means that two thirds of children and young people are living with carers on a long term basis, including some who remain with their carers under adoption or Special Guardian Orders.

Children and young people enjoy excellent support from their carers and from the agency. One child said, 'they are brilliant to me!' and another said 'they make me happy but not shy.' Carers include children in all the celebrations, holidays and experiences of their families and keep memorabilia and photos of special and everyday occasions for them. Sometimes children review their week with their carers and make comments for their records. The agency organise regular outings and activities each school holiday and offer sports/activity holidays; fundraising runs; theatre workshops which lead to an annual production; and the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. As a result, children and young people feel they belong to both their foster family and also to the fostering agency. Their confidence, self-esteem, emotional and physical health clearly improve too and they write positive feedback to the agency, thanking staff and their carers for the progress they know they have made.

Children and young people lead a healthy life, enjoy good routines and receive good support with their education. One child's recent school report said, 'excellent effort, above expectation in all subjects at school'. A ten year old child said, 'in year 5 I have enjoyed a lot - my favourite topic was 'all at sea' because it was exciting - my goal for next year is to be level 5 in literacy.' School leavers receive good support from the agency to identify appropriate college placements and apprenticeships, for

example, in drama, motor mechanics, and sports coaching. Similarly, children and young people are learning to take responsibility for their behaviour and are receiving helpful psychological and emotional support from their carers and from professionals within the agency. As a result of trusting relationships with the skilled adults around them, children and young people are achieving good outcomes and can participate positively with their families and in their communities.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Foster carers benefit from consistently professional and supportive relationships with the agency over a period of years. This helps them to provide high quality care for children and young people with complex needs and challenging behaviour. One carer said in 2012, 'the most helpful thing has been knowing we can always contact them.' Another carer said in 2013, 'Our supervising worker makes regular visits. She has given up to date information and helped with links with the local authority, especially at times when the children didn't have a social worker.'

Foster carers also consistently comment that their training is very good and emphasises the importance of therapeutic care from the outset of initial core training. All carers undertake six core courses in first aid, recording, understanding challenging behaviour, cultural diversity, attachment, safe care and managing allegations, and safeguarding. They are expected to complete these core courses in their first year of fostering, along with reflective logs to discuss in their supervision. Thereafter, regular training and workshops continue, for example, on the subjects of 'caring for teenagers' and 'the controlling child'. Some carers have also been supported to undertake a foundation degree in therapeutic care. However, 12 households of the 78 who have been approved more than a year have not completed the training and development standards for foster carers in accordance with the national minimum standard. This is not reducing the quality of service children and young people receive, but expectations upon carers to complete this and the support necessary to do this, have not been prioritised sufficiently by the agency.

Children and young people benefit from careful matching with carers who can meet their needs; who make them feel part of the family; and who feel valued by the agency. The agency works effectively to ensure that carers have good information about children prior to placement and that introductions, even when made at short notice, are well supported by the agency. Equally, respite placements are only used when it is in the child or young person's best interests, including to support the stability of their main placement. The agency is also now working very effectively with placing authorities to identify matches more quickly and to keep carers well informed about prospective placements. As a result, carers feel valued, and almost all carers have children and young people placed. One carer said, 'the agency works - I would not move - I have helped them stay on their toes.'

Children and young people benefit from a high quality service which works effectively with their placing authority. For example, foster carers and supervising social workers

are committed to each child and young person's placement plan and provide informative and supportive written and verbal contributions to their reviews. Carers and the agency also ensure that carers are clear and up to date about what delegated authority is given to them. Independent Reviewing Officers, (IRO), report very positively about the quality of the service to children and young people they see regularly at 'looked after children' review meetings. Recent comments from IROs include: 'carers clearly know and understand the behaviours of the children and can manage these appropriately'; 'excellent supportive relationships with school which is of benefit to the children'; 'outstanding relationship with the birth mother'; 'carers are super-resilient'; 'excellent life story work carried out by support worker'. However, the agency do not make good use of the IROs advocacy role for children who want to express feelings about their placement to an independent person who knows their situation.

A particular strength of the agency lies in its provision of direct support work to children and young people.

For example, the agency's psychologist helps carers to appreciate that children with insecure attachments are likely to be less responsive to traditional 'behaviour management strategies' than their own children might be/have been. One carer said, 'we felt really emotionally supported and talked about some strategies to 'bring back the child' and reduce her control by giving her some specific responsibilities, such as the dishwasher, and allow her to really control those.' Similarly, support workers provide weekly sessions directly with children and young people, for example, to work on friendships or life story work. The agency nurse provides training for teenagers as well as carers about health issues, substance use, and independence skills. This is also well received. As a result, school teachers and IROs comment on the progress children make in forming positive relationships, understanding their background, and making friends. Carers too, remark on the positive impact of direct work on children and young people, saying that it results in improved behaviour and engagement in confidence-building community activity.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the agency. Members are diverse and insightful, providing challenge to the agency and clear reasons for their recommendations, both at carers' initial assessment, and then at any subsequent review. They are both effective and efficient, meeting regularly and expecting the agency to address any issues in a timely way. As a result, 157 children and young people are living in suitable placements which meet their needs.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Many children and young people placed have complex needs and behaviours arising from past abuse. The agency prioritises safeguarding and child protection by ensuring that carers have a clear understanding of their role in this. Carers are well trained in child protection and safe care practice. They regularly discuss and agree with the professional team around the child how individual children and young

people are to be protected. This includes how children and young people are enabled to take appropriate risks and develop their own understanding of how to protect themselves. For example, where appropriate, detailed agreements are made about children's contact arrangements with birth families and how children are to be protected from misuse of cameras, phones or information. As a result, children and young people are safe and their welfare is promoted. One child said, 'my carers are caring, show me attention and are there for me when I need to talk. They give me boundaries and talk to me about safety inside and outside.'

There is an effective team response to any young person who goes missing. The carer always involves the agency and all relevant parties are informed. Carers receive training on child sexual exploitation and how to respond in the event of children going missing. The incidence of young people going missing or being at risk of exploitation is monitored rigorously by the leaders and managers in the setting and action is taken to minimise the risk. Carers and support workers do all they can to ascertain what is actually happening when young people are missing and to engage them in discussing the issues and reaching solutions. Social workers, police, and the multi-agency safeguarding hubs all regularly share information where appropriate and ensure that strategies to minimise the behaviour are understood and applied. Teenagers at risk of exploitation who go missing are involved in discussions and groups, for example, the 'SPACE' project, which raises their awareness of risk and how to stay safe in the community. As a result, some young people have stopped going missing and are able to stay safe when out in the community. An IRO commented, 'X and X are high risk for exploitation - I would fear for them if they went missing. The carer and the service work on this daily and keep them busy with structured activities outside the home.' A young adult who is now living independently, attributes all her current successes to the fostering agency and the support given to her, both when she was repeatedly missing from her foster placement and now as a care leaver.

Foster carers have an open attitude to disclosures and recognise the impact of abuse or neglect on the behaviour of children and young people they care for. They manage behaviour in the light of this and use only positive approaches. Equally, children and young people are able to raise issues with their carers, social workers or teachers, and are seen alone by the agency's supervising social workers and support workers. As a result, children and young people know how to complain and feel confident that their concerns are addressed.

The agency has ensured a child-centred response and improved its practice following a number of allegations of misconduct made by children and young people during 2012 and 2013. Referral is always made to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for the area where the carers live for a decision about how any investigation is to be conducted. In most instances, allegations and complaints were found to have been unsubstantiated or unproven by multi-agency strategy meetings and 'person in a position of trust' meetings. Most children have either remained in placement or, where they have been temporarily moved, returned to their carers. Supporting social workers have learnt the importance of maintaining relationships with foster carers that are supportive, but also objective and professional about the possibility of abuse



or bad practice. The team have undertaken training in safeguarding together over recent months to refresh their knowledge and explore together approaches to ensure that safeguarding practices are as robust as possible. As a result of robust safeguarding procedures some long standing carers have left the agency, some have resigned from fostering, some have been referred to the Independent Safeguarding Authority and some have been de-registered as carers. The present carer group operates safely and skilfully.

Recruitment and vetting of foster carers, staff and panel members is thorough and ensures that people working in the agency are suitable. Similarly, all persons have contractual obligations to inform the agency of any subsequent concerns which might affect their suitability. These concerns are also considered robustly to prevent unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children or young people.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The leadership and management of the agency demonstrate clear vision and ambition for the children and young people who are fostered. The Registered Manager has an excellent grasp of the fostering regulations and minimum standards. This ensures consistently good outcomes for children at the same time as a vacancy rate of only eight percent of fostering households. Since the last inspection, the agency went through a period of restructuring in 2012. This resulted in a number of teachers in the support team being made redundant and some senior posts either being deleted or not replaced. The impact of these changes on the quality of service to children, young people and carers has been positive. This is because managers are more visible to carers and children and because direct support services are more individualised and complimentary to the services provided by local authorities. An IRO said, 'I am impressed with the service provided and the high aspirations they have for the young people.'

A particular strength of the leadership and management is their commitment to, and success in, providing children and young people with the opportunity to have fun, participate in their community, and influence their day-to-day care. The open-plan office, lounge area and training rooms provide a place where children and young people feel welcome to drop in or to take part in group activities. Equally, leaders and managers actively participate alongside children and young people in trips, performances and charity fund raising events. They also write to them individually to respond to their ideas and congratulate them on their individual achievements. A detailed feedback questionnaire about their placement in various child-friendly formats is used to get children's views about their day-to-day care. Information from these informs both foster carer annual development plans and the service as a whole, providing clear evidence of the positive impact of foster care on children's lives. As a result, children and young people identify with the agency and feel a part of the organisation. This measurably improves their confidence, social skills, engagement and behaviour.

The Registered Manager has developed and improved the monitoring of the agency. Monthly and annual reviews of the agency are both thorough and insightful. There is particularly good oversight of safeguarding concerns and any complaints, allegations and significant incidents in the face of what the Registered manager calls 'unprecedented challenges to the agency during 2012/13.' Effective weekly team meetings of all staff ensures timely and robust responses to all concerns through good communication and clear allocation of tasks. Monitoring of all children and young people's progress is being measured variously through the tracker formats of the different placing authorities. Detailed feedback about the impact of the service on children's placements is also being obtained from IRO on the occasion of children's 'looked after' reviews. The format designed by the agency elicits the impact of the support services of the agency as well as the direct impact of the carers. The feedback has the added value of being independent of both the service and the placing authority and shows that the agency is widely regarded as being good or outstanding. However, monitoring systems do not provide a reliable quantitative overview of all children and young people's progress across all their outcomes. This means that the agency does not have a real measure of its overall success. Nevertheless, shortfalls are identified effectively on an anecdotal and individualised basis and responses to them are robust.

The Registered Manager maintains a child-centred focus to all objectives for the agency. He has ensured that the quality of the agency's work is better communicated to the regulator, Ofsted, when significant reportable incidents occur. Over the next three months the agency is working towards ensuring that the processes for the recruitment and assessment of foster carers are as robust and efficient as the current matching and placement of children. The first part of the preparation to foster course is now delivered monthly to ensure that prospective carers are promptly met. If appropriate, the assessment process is begun immediately and completed robustly within four months, if possible. A new foster carer review framework has also been brought in recently which encourages carers to be more explicitly accountable for their practice and to reflect on the support provided by the agency. These examples show that the agency continuously improves its service to promote best outcomes for children and young people.

## 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.