

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering service had 19 approved foster carers in 12 fostering households offering a total of 22 placements. 14 children were placed within 10 households. The agency provides long-term or permanent placements, short-term or emergency placements, bridging placements, short break or respite placements and a small number of specialised placements for children or young people with disabilities.

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**.

Leaders and managers responded positively to requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. Effective work identified during a monitoring visit by Ofsted soon after the last full inspection has been maintained and built upon. Appropriate action has been taken by senior leaders to appoint a new manager to ensure this vital position remains filled.

The small size of the agency leads to the establishment of positive relationships, with foster carers referring to the agency feeling like a family network. All know each

other well and senior leaders are fully engaged in the work of the service. This ensures there is constructive and pro-active oversight at all times. Children and young people are supported to feel part of their fostering families through consistent engagement. Their experiences within individual families are echoed through a strong value of consultation within the agency as whole. This helps them feel valued at the same time as promoting their safety and welfare through open lines of communication.

The fostering panel functions well. Members have grown in confidence and understand their responsibility to question and challenge effectively. A competent panel chair and a rigorous Agency Decision Maker further help to safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

Foster carers highlight the quality of support and the delivery of training as key strengths of the agency. They feel part of the professional team around each child or young person. Close working relationships with external agencies lead to positive outcomes for children and young people

Compared to other agencies nationally there are a high proportion of unplanned endings of placements. This has been over 60% during the year preceding this inspection, compared with a national average of just 8%. This significant rise, when compared to figures provided in previous years, is linked to changes in circumstance brought about as carers have left the agency. Almost half the fostering households approved by the agency have left during the last 12 months. The majority retired from fostering or transferred to other providers, some left because practical changes in their household meant they could no longer foster. One household was de-registered, demonstrating willingness by the agency to challenge poor practice and drive up standards. However, in the main children and young people currently placed within the agency benefit from long term, stable placements. Nearly 65% of current placements have remained unchanged for more than a year. Others who have moved within this time frame continue to be placed within the agency, but have transferred to different carers.

One shortfall against the Fostering Services (England) Regulations is identified through this inspection. This relates to the need for the agency to obtain agreement from local police that their policy and procedure relating to missing children and young people is acceptable. The impact of this shortfall is limited by the fact that the document in place and is rigorously followed by carers and staff. While leaders and managers took immediate steps to address this matter during this inspection, they were unable to complete all tasks before the inspection concluded.

Recommendations made relate to, ensuring that all foster carers complete the training, support and development standards within one year of approval, being clear when recording vetting checks for new staff and improving the quality of fostering panel minutes.

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
13 (2011)	prepare and implement a policy, which is agreed with the local police, setting out the measures to be followed to prevent children placed with foster parents from going missing from their placement, and the procedure to be followed when a child is missing from a foster parent's home without permission. (Regulation 13(3)(a) and (b))	31/05/2015

Recommendations

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

- ensure written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service which includes DBS Disclosures, including the level of the Disclosure and the unique reference number (in line with eligibility to obtain such checks) (NMS 19.3 (b))
- ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the Training, Support and Development Standards have been attained within 12 months of approval. (NMS 20.3)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are helped to settle into new placements through receiving good quality information. Whenever possible this is shared prior to arrival as part of a planned introduction process. Profiles of individual carers and their families are enhanced by informative children's guides produced in accessible and age appropriate formats. This allows children and young people to understand what to expect and to refer back to documents for clarity. Further contact information is provided in handy cards that children and young people can easily keep with them at all times.

Children and young people benefit from close working relationships between placing

authorities, foster carers and staff in the agency. This helps to ensure that individual care plans are understood and followed through. As a result the children and young people seen as part of this inspection present as comfortable and settled. They are reassured through the way that carers and staff demonstrate they know each of them so well. One young person said that the best thing about living with their foster carers is, 'Having people around me who really care and having people who know what they're doing'.

All in the agency work hard to seek and elicit the views of children and young people. Fostering families do this as a natural part of daily life. Supervising social workers do this systematically on each visit to every foster home. Placing social workers find this helpful, especially when they are some distance away. However, the outcome for children and young people is that they are confident about expressing their views and feel listened to. Even when it is not possible to meet their personal requests, things are explained carefully, helping them to understand and accept the reasons decisions are made. As one young person put it, 'They take your ideas into consideration and try and do your idea'.

Consequently, children and young people are helped to feel part of the families with which they are placed. They clearly communicate that they feel valued and are treated the same as others in the household. Foster carers see this as a fundamental part of their role. However, while many children and young people form secure and positive attachments, leaders and managers are aware of a high rate of unplanned endings within the agency during the year preceding this inspection. Action taken to address this is beginning to take effect as the rate with which this happens is reducing.

When appropriate, young people remain with their carers under other arrangements. Even when this results in carers having to resign from the agency, young people are provided with and benefit from consistency, continuity and a furtherance of their sense of belonging.

As they grow and develop young people take increased responsibility for themselves. Equally they demonstrate maturity and compassion for others, appropriately supporting their friends in ways that help to keep them safe from harm. For example, young people recognise the vulnerabilities of their friends when they are missing. They take direct action to obtain the support of adults in a way that keeps other's safe.

Most children and young people are in school or college and are achieving through receiving an education appropriate to their level of needs. When difficulties are experienced staff in the agency advocate robustly on their behalf to ensure barriers to education are addressed and removed. Improvements made since the last inspection result in a clearer understanding of the impact the agency has on the lives of children and young people and the progress that they make over time. Effective systems help to track the educational and health outcomes of each child or young person. This helps to highlight difficulties or problems and ensures prompt action is taken to address these. Access to additional services is obtained when necessary to

promote the emotional well-being of children and young people.

Children and young people enjoy a wide range of activities that help them grow, develop and have new experiences. This helps them progress in ways that they notice. Children and young people recognise change in themselves that they attribute to the care they receive. In particular they identify improvements in their behaviour, maturity and self-confidence. Foster carers also highlight changes in individual children and young people. They say that over time they develop the ability to talk about problems and are helped to understand that it is alright to make mistakes. One highlighted how a young person had, 'demonstrated that she is able to reflect upon things from the past and move on'.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

A significant proportion of approved foster carers, almost one third, have not completed the training, support and development standards within the timescale set out in national minimum standards. For some the failure to do this has continued for several years.

Minutes of fostering panel meetings do not clearly set out the reasons behind panel recommendations. While the contributions of individual members are captured it is not always obvious how matters raised are concluded. This makes the task of the Agency Decision Maker more difficult as they are required to pick out key points themselves.

These shortfalls mean that the characteristics of a good service are not all in place. However, the shortfalls are limited and do not impact negatively on the safety and welfare of children and young people. Other areas of development help to minimise their influence.

Considerable investment has been made in delivering an extensive training programme available to all foster carers. This is received extremely well by foster carers who now see training as one of the strengths of the agency. They identify positive change in the agency's approach to training saying, 'It has always been relevant, but it's not always been as in depth'. Another carer spoke of how the relaxed atmosphere in the delivery of training helped them learn; 'You almost don't feel that you're learning while you are'. Others use words such as 'informative', 'relevant' and 'practical' to describe their recent experiences of training within the agency. Those undergoing assessment and being prepared to foster confirm that they are helped to understand their role. Preparation courses include a strong focus on safeguarding.

Members of the fostering panel come from a range of backgrounds and bring a range of experiences to their task. Panel members are now willing to take action if they are not content with information provided to them. They focus on the safety and well-being of children and young people and challenge the agency to raise

standards when appropriate. For example the panel now robustly challenges the quality of reports. This leads to direct action from leaders and managers to ensure standards are raised to an acceptable level. The panel's task is supported by a strong Agency Decision Maker who has also brought about demonstrable and reassuring improvement since their appointment.

An excellent level of support is provided to foster carers. 'The support the agency gives you is probably the best thing', is a comment from one carer. Without exception all foster carers consulted as part of this inspection provided positive feedback about their supervising social worker. They highlight that every other month visits are made during an evening so that both carers in a couple can meet the supervising social worker. One foster carer said, 'She makes herself part of what is going on.' Reports of these meetings are produced quickly and efficiently. They demonstrate that support is balanced with suitable challenge of carers and monitoring of key aspects of each placement. Concerted attempts are made to engage with children and young people during every supervision visit. The quality of support provided leads to fostering families building a strong allegiance with the agency. One said, 'We feel proud to work for Following Whispers; we feel part of something. It does feel like a family and your views are listened to and those of the children and young people'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The safety and well-being of children and young people is central to the work of the agency and given high priority. Foster carers demonstrate a sound understanding of safeguarding issues. During this inspection the inspector was able to observe that allegations or concerns in relation to any foster carer are dealt with promptly, efficiently and safely. External agencies are approached accordingly. When required to do so, thorough investigations are undertaken by the agency. This ensures that children and young people are kept safe while providing support to any foster carers who are implicated.

The relatively small size of the agency leads to an openness in communication. This helps children, young people and carers feel they can contact anyone in the agency. As a result children and young people feel listened to and that their views are valued. Equally, carers feel able to approach the agency for support or to express a concern.

A considered and proportionate approach to risk means that children and young people do not miss out. Consequently, they enjoy the same experiences as their contemporaries. Furthermore, foster carers look for safe opportunities that allow children and young people to be given more freedom or simply to take more responsibility for themselves. Children and young people are appropriately involved in formulating and agreeing plans that affect them. For example, being allowed to attend a club or group without adult supervision, playing in the park with friends or riding their bike on their own for the first time when in the confines of a holiday park. These examples help children and young people grow and develop safely at a

pace that is right for them.

There are no instances of children or young people being restrained by foster carers. Incidents when young people go missing are not rare. However a clear policy is in place which is robustly followed when this does happen. This ensures that foster carers and staff are fully aware of their responsibilities to safeguard children and young people in this regard. The agency maintains open and constructive lines of communication with specialist police officers. However, at the point of this inspection the agency's policy had not been shared with or agreed by local police. While a requirement is made to adhere to this particular regulation the impact of this shortfall is minimised through the sound practice evidenced by the provider. In addition, steps were taken to share the policy during this inspection.

Recruitment practices are generally sound and robust. All information required prior to an appointment is obtained. However, the type of disclosure sought from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) is not recorded on individual files. This poor attention to detail leads to a lack of clarity as to the level of checks obtained. While the provider indicated that all checks are at an enhanced level, they were unable to evidence this. The impact of this shortfall is limited, but a recommendation is made to ensure all information is recorded clearly in future.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Since the last full inspection of this agency leaders and managers have demonstrated significant ability to raise standards by driving and sustaining improvements. At a monitoring visit on 20 January 2014 it was identified that all seven requirements made at the last full inspection had been met and all nine recommendations were either met or were being addressed, but needed more time to be completed. This inspection found that the progress identified at the monitoring visit has been maintained and changes in practice are now embedded. These wide ranging improvements are addressed throughout this report. While one requirement and three recommendations are made following this inspection, none are repeated from the previous inspection.

The agency has taken suitable action to appoint a new manager to lead the service. At the time of this inspection their formal application to become registered with Ofsted had not been received. Consequently, no judgement has yet been made as to their suitability. Prior to their appointment satisfactory arrangements had been put in place to cover after the previous Registered Manager left.

The agency maintains positive working relationships with placing authorities. For some these have been built and established over many years, with over 40% of all children and young people having been in their current placements for more than two years. The nature of referrals is monitored by the agency so as to identify and respond to emerging need. This can help to influence decisions about recruitment. However, as a relatively small agency placements are only offered when a genuine

potential match is identified.

All leaders and managers are fully involved in the work of the agency. This helps them to get to know children and young people well. Personal knowledge of individual children and young people is augmented by simple, but clear systems that effectively monitor and track progress. Carers and staff work together to set goals and targets for each child or young person. Rewards often link to good opportunities to have fun or go on outings together.

The views of children, young people, foster carers and placing social workers are clearly considered within regular reviews of the quality of care provided by the agency. This contributes to sound monitoring processes that link directly to improvements in the service.

The agency's statement of purpose clearly communicates the services available and sets out how these will be delivered. Regular reviews of the document and the children's guides ensure that information is kept up to date, accurate and accessible to all who need it. By continuing to meet the aims and objectives set within the statement of purpose the agency remains financially viable.

All relevant staff are appropriately qualified and registered as social workers. While some come to their roles with limited post qualifying experience they openly access opportunities to undertake the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE). All staff access internal and external opportunities to grow and develop. Foster carers and staff value the chance to train alongside each other, but senior managers are also open to requests to attend external conferences or courses. Supervision of staff is given high priority and is consequently valued by all. The new manager has introduced more structure and focus to team meetings. By doing this, time is used more effectively and individual roles are more clearly defined.

All significant events are notified to key agencies, including Ofsted. This ensures that all stakeholders are kept informed and the regulatory body is able to monitor the service appropriately.

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.