

Ownlife Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspectors	Seka Graovac Lee Kirwin
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Date of last inspection	First inspection

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Service information

Brief description of the service

This is a small, independent, privately-owned agency. It was registered in January 2013 to provide a full range of fostering services. It has five foster families, two of which have been recruited in the last 12 months. It has three placements. Two of them are parent and child placements and the third also started as a mother and baby placement. All parents are adults and all children are below the age of three.

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 leaders and managers of the agency are highly experienced and competent in their roles. They are effective at providing a high-standard fostering service. They operate a safe fostering service with safe families. They have a tangibly positive impact on children's lives and in some instances, on their parents' lives as well.

Children experience a good family life and stability. They are happy, well-supported and loved. They have developed a secure base from which they thrive. They make good progress across different aspects of their welfare and confidently reach developmental milestones.

The agency's evidence-based fostering practice is subject to ongoing consultation, reflection and learning. Rigorous monitoring underpins comprehensive development and improvement plans. The funds and necessary infrastructures are in place to

support further growth. Professionals describe the agency as one with great potential. Some aspects of practice are of outstanding quality.

This inspection highlights the need for the agency to recruit more foster carers and to strengthen the fostering panel. The agency is already taking steps to achieve this.

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.

Recommendations

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

Implement a more effective strategy for recruiting sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and future needs of children. (NMS 13)

Strengthen the fostering panel, in terms of its membership and the frequency of meetings and panel-specific training. (NMS 14)

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

Judgement outcome: Good

Children are well settled in their foster homes. They experience a good family-life and stability. They are safe and at ease living with their foster carers. Their physical, psychological, emotional and social needs are met. They have formed healthy attachments and, in some instances, strong bonds with their carers. They have developed a secure base from which they grow and make good progress across different aspects of their welfare. They confidently reach developmental milestones. According to their social workers, they have blossomed and thrived in their placements. The children are happy, well-supported and loved.

They benefit from positive relationships between their parents and foster carers. Some mothers' parenting skills have improved as a result of living with their foster families. They say that they have learnt how to put the needs of their child first and how to respond in a range of situations, for example, when their child is having a tantrum. One parent says: 'I feel warm, cared for, listened-to, safe and secure. I have felt very supported and learnt such a lot. I have got the best chance possible of keeping my child.'

Children remain with their foster carers as long as it is needed. They experience stability and consistency in their lives. An example of this is that after a positive parenting assessment, a mother and her child were able to successfully return to the community. On the other hand, there are a number of examples of the foster carers increasingly providing direct care and making sure that the needs of children are met. One placement has become a placement of a sole child, after starting as a mother and baby placement. This child has experienced a continuity of care from the foster carer, from the first days of his life, until adoptive parents are found.

The agency's matching process and the excellent life-story work effectively contribute to the development of children's identity and of them feeling valued.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency's comprehensive arrangements for preparation, assessment, support, review and training of foster carers underlie the good quality service that it provides. The agency's decision-maker and the fostering panel have set a good professional standard for the processes for initial and continued approval of foster carers. They have proactively driven the quality of the service forward and continue to do so.

Managers have made a good start at recruiting foster carers with caring attitudes, in-depth knowledge of the needs of children who live away from their families and with the skills necessary to meet these needs effectively. The foster carers have a clear

understanding of their role. Despite being relatively new to fostering, they are able to fulfil their role with confidence, good skills and in a positive frame of mind.

They also understand the roles that the agency, placing authorities and other services have in the lives of looked after children, and where they, as foster carers, fit within the overall picture. They see themselves as part of the team around the child and as such, make significant contributions to the care planning process. An example of this is providing regular reports on parent and child placements to the local authority's social workers. At times, this includes sharing written reports on a daily basis.

The foster carers advocate effectively on behalf of the children in their care and always have their best interests at heart. One foster family described their motivation to foster as having 'a space in their home and the space in their lives' for a child in need of care. The foster carers do not shy away from challenging any views that limit a child's progress, for example challenging some social workers' views that no other support is needed to promote learning and educational achievements as the school has sole responsibility for the child's education,

The foster carers see learning as a key value in life. They provide a stimulating environment and a wide range of learning opportunities for children. They help children to have new experiences and to develop positive attitudes towards learning.

The foster carers talk with excitement and motivation about their own learning and the agency's excellent training programme. They have a clear commitment to implement what they have learnt in practice and to build on their fostering skills through reflection and continued learning.

They talk about the support that they receive from the agency in very positive terms. They describe Ownlife Fostering as a very welcoming, nurturing and highly professional agency that has children at the centre of all its activities. The supervising social worker visits the foster families at least once a month and provides them with the individually tailored advice and guidance. One foster carer comments: 'The agency has provided us with more support than we could have ever imagined.' Another carer said this: 'The agency is very efficient, fair and supportive. They are genuinely caring.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: Good

The agency operates a safe fostering service with safe families. The thorough vetting of all staff, panel members and foster carers is effective at ensuring that only people who are able to protect and promote the welfare of children are recruited into their roles. Foster carers receive regular and up-to-date training on protecting and safeguarding children. They have high levels of safeguarding awareness and good understanding of what makes safeguarding practice effective. They recognise the impact of abuse or neglect on the behaviour and views of children and adults. The

foster carers take appropriate actions to protect and support children and their parents in developing emotional resilience and more constructive ways of being, and in case of parents, to improve their parenting skills.

The agency operates within an effective 'working together to safeguard children' framework and has established a culture of transparency and openness. Foster carers know that any referral information with regards to a potential placement is shared with them in its fullness. The agency's robust risk assessment process underpins the careful matching process. High-risk placements are only made (or are maintained) with decisive implementation of the comprehensive and well-resourced risk management strategies and safe-care plans. This has at times, included a care staff member staying awake overnight within the foster family's home to support the placement. Out of eight placements that this agency accepted in total, two were disrupted. This was due to the additional risks and needs being identified during the placement. The agency contributed well to the process of moving children to other provisions that offer a more targeted specialist support.

The foster carers have good listening and observational skills. They are sensitive towards the needs of children and highly vigilant about potential risks. They appropriately identify and share any concerns with the fostering agency and the placement authority. They involve other appropriate services, such as the police, the fire authority or the school when it is necessary. They fully and without delay implement the local protocols that contribute to safeguarding children; for example, if a child is absent or missing from the placement.

The supervising social workers see the children on their own when they visit foster families to make sure that they are safe and listened-to. They also visit unannounced and undertake regular health and safety checks to make sure the home remains safe.

The agency has been effective at safeguarding children and promoting their welfare. There have been no major safeguarding incidents and no notifiable events made to Ofsted.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: Good

This is the agency's first inspection. The manager has over 35 years of post-qualifying social work experience that includes previously managing an outstanding independent agency. Since April 2014, when she registered with Ofsted to manage Ownlife Fostering, she has decisively moved this service forward from its initially low levels of activity.

She is a highly competent social care manager that has embedded a reflective and evidence-based social work practice into the service. She has created comprehensive systems, structures, policies and procedures and recording forms to support the consistent delivery of a high-standard fostering service. She has made sure that the

agency is run in full accordance with legislation and good social care practice. The agency fulfils its Statement of Purpose and is effective at having a positive impact on children's lives. The manager rigorously monitors the children's experiences and outcomes. She makes sure that they receive the support that they need in order to continue to make progress.

Some aspects of the fostering practice are outstanding. An example of this is enabling foster carers to demonstrate that they continually evaluate the impact of their care on children. Carers highlight those approaches that have the greatest positive impact on individual children. By doing so, they are building on good practice examples that can be shared with other carers and celebrate both their own and children's achievements.

Another example of the agency's outstanding practice is its exceptionally creative photographic life-story work. This work enables mothers and children to reflect on their own lives and experiences, in an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance. The agency encourages them to take photographs. By making choices about what to record, they take some control over their lives. A photo-journalist helps them in designing their image-making. He also produces artistic photographs that uniquely and beautifully capture their feelings and precious life moments. This makes them feel valued and gives them records to treasure for the rest of their lives. It also provides the agency with an innovative way of gaining insight into the experiences that the parents and children have while receiving this fostering service. The agency continues to refine its practice, for example, by sensitively addressing one mother's feeling of being 'spied on' while undergoing the assessment process.

The fostering social care practice is subject to ongoing consultation, reflection and learning. Detailed development and improvement plans are underpinned by rigorous monitoring and realistic self-examination.

This inspection report highlights two areas for further improvement. The agency has already started to address these weaknesses. They relate to having more foster carers, [to address the diverse range of needs of looked after children who need to be fostered and to secure financial viability of the agency](#), and strengthening the panel. The panel does not have an independent member with the experience of being a foster carer and also, no arrangements for accessing medical advice are in place. The panel meet infrequently and this shortfall has impacted negatively on its cohesion.

Funds are available to sustain the agency while income is low and the service is growing. The service is appropriately resourced and has an infrastructure that can support the planned growth. A training and development manager, an independent reviewing officer and a senior supervising social worker have been recently appointed. The agency also has contract with firms offering advice on human resources and health and safety.

All staff, managers and panel members are appropriately qualified and effectively supervised. The qualified social workers who do not have substantial experience in fostering receive in-depth induction and comprehensive support to develop specific fostering expertise.

A competent office manager ensures that the service is efficiently organised and administered. All records are meticulously kept and audited.

The leaders and managers have established a close working relationship with one local authority and are building on their connections with other local authorities and other services. Professionals describe this fostering service as one with a great potential.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards 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. inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.