

SWIIS Foster Care (Darlington)

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

SWIIS Foster Care Ltd. is an independent fostering agency based in Darlington. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people. The agency comprises the manager, one principal social worker, five social workers, a placements officer, one health and one education adviser, four placement support workers and two administrators.

At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 68 children and young people placed with approximately 50 foster families.

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.**

This is a good fostering service. It is very well managed by the Registered Manager and the directors of the agency who monitor its operation and the quality of its work effectively. This helps ensure that the quality of the service delivered to young people and their foster carers is consistently good.

The agency has a strong, effective and well trained staff team who work well together with partner agencies to provide and support well matched and stable foster placements to young people.

Assessments of foster carers are rigorous, evaluative and provide an accurate view of the competence, attitudes and suitability of the applicants to foster children. Application, assessment and approval processes take place in a timely manner so do not deter

applicants unnecessarily. The agency provides its carers with good training and high levels of support. It reviews carers' continued suitability to foster regularly but, although the views of children's local authority social workers are sought routinely, these views are very rarely received. The lack of this information means that carers' continued suitability to foster is not as robustly considered as it should be.

The agency works well with local authorities to make good and well matched placements for children with its foster carers. Carers are provided with very high levels of support. This means that most young people benefit from stable and settled placements. The agency's social workers and support workers know young people well and provide very good levels of support. This helps ensure that young people are safe, well, make good progress and enjoy a positive experience of foster care.

Young people have a real say in their own care and the running of the agency. Staff and carers listen to their views and advocate strongly on their behalf where necessary. Young people are involved in the recruitment and training of staff and foster carers as well as the development of some of the agency's information. Young people make good progress. They receive very good support with their health and education. This means that their health and educational achievement improves during their time with their foster carers. The agency focuses its very thorough monitoring on the quality of its work but does not capture, report on and monitor the outcomes being achieved for young people as well as it could do. This means it is not measuring the impact of its service on children's lives as well as it could.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- make sure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough to allow the fostering services to properly satisfy itself about its carers' ongoing suitability to foster. Specifically, make sure to gain the views of the social workers of any young people placed with the carers during the previous 12 months (NMS 13.8)
- make sure the agency's board members monitor the outcomes of the service in order to satisfy themselves that the service is achieving good outcomes for children. Specifically, include information about the progress of, and outcomes for, young people within the three-monthly reports to the agency's board members. (NMS 25.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **good.**

Young people make good progress and have positive experiences during their time in foster care. They benefit from living in stable, well supported placements which help them develop meaningful and nurturing relationships. One young person said, 'I love it here as I feel safe and secure.' Another said, 'I just feel like a normal child.'

The agency works closely with local authorities to make sure that children are placed with foster carers who are as well matched to their needs as possible. Wherever possible young people move to their foster carers in a planned manner. Information about their prospective carers is given to them before they are placed even in very short notice situations. The agency works hard to acquire full information about young people when they are placed and ongoing support to placements is of a very high standard. This means that children make progress and levels of placement stability are high. For example, approaching two-thirds of young people have been in placement for over 12 months and nearly one-third have lived with their carers for over three years. One young person said her carers always support her 'through hard times' and that they 'are always there for me when I need them most'.

Staff listen to young people and ensure their voices are heard about their care and plans. For example, in a situation in which a local authority planned to move a young person against his wishes, the agency successfully challenged this on behalf of the young person who is now placed long-term with his carers.

The agency's social workers and support workers spend time with young people individually and within more structured activities. This helps workers get to know young people and improves the support they receive. A range of leisure activities are provided by the agency as well as the activities young people undertake with their foster carers. Foster carers are proactive and committed in the support they provide to young people. For example, foster carers travel the country with one young person to support her significant athletics talent and the agency provides additional financial support for this where necessary.

Young people have a genuine involvement in the running of the agency. This helps them to exert control of their lives and events that happen to them. For example, young people take part in the recruitment process for staff and foster carers, help provide training to prospective foster carers and the agency's fostering panel and have helped to develop the agency's children's guide as well as other information.

Young people have access to all primary and any specialist health provision they require. The agency's health adviser works well with other agency staff and those from partner agencies to access health input, including children's mental health services, where these are difficult to access. Young people also make good progress with their education. The agency's education adviser supports carers and staff to liaise with education authorities and schools to ensure young people receive a good education. For example, one carer said the agency 'helped us to get (young person) into a school quickly'. School moves and exclusions are rare, school attendance is very good and young people's school achievement and success improves.

The agency's staff and foster carers help young people to maintain contact with members of their own family wherever this is appropriate for them. For example, one young person said her foster carer 'makes me feel safe by making sure that I am ok when I go to visit my mum'. This helps young people retain important family ties.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This agency provides a good quality service to its foster carers, the young people placed and the local authorities for whom it provides placements which is very good in many respects.

The agency has an effective foster carer recruitment strategy based on a clear understanding of the needs of the young people it is likely to be asked to provide placements for. Enquirers are provided with good information and initial screening visits are robust. This means that people who go on to apply to foster have a good understanding of what this entails and the agency has already begun to establish their suitability to foster children. Once applications are accepted rigorous assessments are undertaken. These establish suitability and provide a clear evaluation of the applicant's capability, competence and their attitude to fostering vulnerable young people. The agency carries out the entire enquiry and assessment process in a timely and efficient manner which ensures that good scrutiny takes place without unnecessarily deterring applicants.

The agency's panel works effectively and provides a good scrutiny of the cases presented to it. Decision making in the agency is similarly robust. This ensures that approved foster carers are suitable and provides effective checks on the quality of the agency's practice.

The support provided to foster carers to help them care for young people is excellent both during the day and out of office hours. Many carers spoke very positively about this 24 hour support. For example, one said that support is 'only a telephone call away, day or night'. Foster carers know their supervising social workers and other team members well. They work effectively together within trusting friendly relationships which are managed in a highly professional manner. Fostering social workers provide foster carers with regular and effective supervision as well as more informal and ongoing support and guidance. This, in turn helps ensure that carers provide young people with the support and care they need.

The training provided to foster carers by the agency is good and wide-ranging. Training is updated on a rolling basis and includes safeguarding, first aid, behaviour management, trafficking, exploitation, self-harm and attachment. Where foster carers are looking after young people with specific and individualised needs specialist training is provided. The great majority of foster carers approved for over twelve months have attained the Training, Support and Development Standards. This good quality training helps ensure that carers are able to provide young people with a high quality of care that meets their needs. One carer said, 'We feel we have the tools to do the job we need to do it, with training and the 24 hour support we receive.'

Foster carers' reviews are held annually and there is an efficient system to ensure they take place on time. The agency consults with young people for the reviews of their carers. It is also efficient in contacting the local authority social workers of the young people placed with the carers to seek their views. However, it very rarely receives comments or opinions from these social workers. The agency is not good enough at

following these requests up or seeking other ways of capturing their view about foster carers. This means these reviews are not as robust as they should be as, potentially, key views about carers' continued suitability to foster may not be available for consideration.

The agency works well with placing authorities to make and support good placements. Delegated consent arrangements are established when children are placed with their foster carers. The agency's social workers and support workers meet young people regularly. This helps to ensure that they receive any support they need. The agency supports foster carers to be part of the team working with the young person to advocate on their behalf when in placement. For example carers and agency social workers worked with a local authority to help a young person to remain in a long term placement with her carer despite this not being the initial plan.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good.**

The agency works effectively with placing local authorities to safeguard young people. It works well to identify possible foster carers for young people it receives referrals for. It only offers placements in families who are as well matched as possible to the identified needs of children. The agency works well with placing social workers to seek and share good information about young people, their foster carers and their progress in placement. Monthly summaries, provided to placing social workers, help them to monitor young people's continued wellbeing and progress. Young people feel safe in their placements. For example, one said 'It's my first foster placement and I love it here as I feel safe and secure.'

The agency and its carers develop individualised safe care policies and risk assessments for each young person placed. These are kept under review and prompt action is taken should any concerns arise. Foster carers are well trained, both before and after approval in working with young people who may have been abused or who may be at additional risk of harm. Along with the high levels of support, this means that young people receive good help to stay safe in a way that still allows them to develop their own independence.

Young people go missing from their foster placements infrequently. The agency monitors situations in which young people are absent without authority closely. It takes appropriate action depending upon the degree of identified risk and whether their whereabouts are known. Where there are additional risks to young people including a risk of sexual exploitation, the agency and its carers work closely with placing authorities to help protect young people. This means that young people's safety is maintained as far as possible.

Young people are able to express their views and voice any concerns they may have. The agency provides them with good information and a range of easy ways to contact someone should they have concerns. Young people have good relationships with the agency's social workers which helps them express any concerns. Their views and concerns are taken seriously and action is taken in respect of any concerns raised. When safeguarding or child protection concerns do occur, the agency responds to these promptly in line with the local authority's procedures to ensure that young people are safe.

Recruitment process for foster carers, staff and members of the central panel list are robust and thorough. Thorough suitability and background checks are undertaken and thorough evaluation of applicants' attitudes and aptitudes take place. Commendably, young people have a significant involvement in the recruitment process for staff members and in foster carers' preparation training. This helps bring their unique perspective to these processes.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good.**

This agency is well managed at a strategic and operational level. There is strong and effective leadership from the Registered Manager and more senior managers in the organisation. This leadership demonstrates an impressive focus on the quality of the service it provides and the wellbeing of the children and young people it works with.

The manager monitors the activities of the agency and the quality of service it provides closely. This monitoring identifies and addresses any issues required. The agency's Responsible Individual and board of directors are equally thorough in monitoring the agency's quality of service. Detailed three monthly reports are presented to the board and a comprehensive annual review of the service takes place. However, this monitoring focuses on the actions of the agency, its compliance, timeliness, and quality of service. The monitoring does not capture the difference this is making to children's lives well enough. Although recent work has taken place to capture and track the progress made and outcomes achieved by young people this is not well enough developed yet. Consequently although the agency can be sure about the quality of its work, it is not yet able to systematically demonstrate the impact of this on improving young people's lives.

The agency communicates effectively with the local authorities it works with, both before and after placements are made. The agency uses its good working relationships with these authorities to share information with them and challenge them where this is necessary to ensure young people receive the support they need.

The manager is well qualified and experienced and her expertise is appreciated by staff, foster carers and professionals in partner agencies alike. The agency's staff team is well trained and qualified. It is a strong and effective team that is provided with very good support from the manager. The team have manageable caseloads and are mutually supportive in cases which may require more work. Supervision and appraisal systems are effective and staff members undertake training which helps to maintain and develop their skills.

The agency makes appropriate notifications to Ofsted and ensures that appropriate action is taken in response to any significant events that take place.

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.