
SWIIS Foster Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC043551
Inspection date	28/09/2015
Inspector	Mandy Williams/ Lynn O'Driscoll
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

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Registered person	SWIIS Foster Care Limited
Registered manager	Victoria Jones
Responsible individual	Keith Stopher
Date of last inspection	14/12/2011

Service information

Brief description of the service

SWIIS Foster Care Limited is a national independent provider of foster care services. This report relates to one branch of the agency, which is based in Manchester, with a satellite office in Rawtenstall, Lancashire. The agency recruits, assesses and approves foster carers who provide a range of placements types. This includes emergency, short term, long term and mother and baby placements.

At the time of the inspection, there were approximately 86 approved foster families caring for 108 children and young people.

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 and effective fostering service. The outcomes for children and young people are positive while they live with the agency's foster carers. Many young people benefit from long term placements. This consistency enables them to make meaningful attachments and make progress across all areas of their development. Young people benefit from the additional input from the agency's health and education advisors.

The agency recruits and assesses a range of fostering households to meet the needs of children awaiting placement. The preparation and assessment of foster carers is of good quality and undertaken in a timely manner. Assessment reports clearly demonstrate the ability of the applicants to care effectively for children. Good matching and high levels of support from the agency results in the making of stable

placements.

The agency has positive relationships with partner organisations and communication between them is effective. The agency also liaises appropriately with other safeguarding bodies when required. Decisions are based on the safety and welfare of children and young people.

Managers are visible and approachable. Staff and foster carers say that they have access to them for advice and support when they need to. They demonstrate a commitment to the development of the service. Foster carers feel they have an opportunity to contribute to this.

As a result of this inspection three requirements have been made. These relate to the training of foster carers, recruitment checks and the agency's internal review of its service. An additional four recommendations relate to; panel members' appraisal; the agency decision making process; the agency's missing from home procedures and the manager's strategic monitoring and auditing. However, despite these shortfalls the agency is functioning as a good agency. There has been no direct impact on the safety and welfare of young people. Managers were also keen to take immediate action to address the issues raised.

Areas of 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.

Requirement	Due date
17: Support, training and information for foster parents Ensure that the fostering service provides foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them; specifically the timely completion of core training (Regulation 17(1))	16/11/2015
20: Fitness of workers Ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to individuals employed by the fostering service (Regulation 20(3))	16/11/2015
35: Review of quality of care Ensure that the Chief Inspector is provided with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of this regulation and that this provides for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority. (Regulation 35(2)(3))	16/11/2015

Recommendations

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

ensure that children who do go missing are protected as far as possible and responded to positively on their return; specifically that independent return interviews are completed and that the agency confirms that their policies are compatible with their regional protocols (NMS 5)

ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the services policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring (NMS 25.2)

ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Statutory guidance, Volume 4, para 5.15)

ensure that the process for making an agency decision or a qualifying determination is clear and that the process includes all the features identified in this paragraph. (Statutory guidance, Volume 4, para 5.40)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people feel integrated into their foster families. They say that they feel part of the foster family and are included in activities and family events. Young people talk about travelling abroad and being involved in a range of activities. These new opportunities help broaden young people's knowledge and they have gained in confidence as a result. One young person said, 'they (the foster carers) are kind and treat us as a family. They listen to me and reassure me, which makes me feel safe. They go to school meetings and help me with my homework. I am doing well at school. The rules are fair. I like basketball, football and swimming. I get pocket money. I spend some and save some.' Foster carers are clear about the decision-making powers delegated to them, ensuring that young people are able to participate in events and activities along with their peers.

Whenever possible young people move into their foster families in a planned manner. However, even when this is not possible the agency do their best to ensure that they have some information to ease their anxieties about their move. The agency keep helpful profile booklets about their foster carers' electronically and send these to young people's social workers so that they can share them prior to the young person meeting their new family. Young people then receive a welcome pack of information following their placement. This includes a copy of the children's guide to the fostering agency and additional information about who to contact if they are

unhappy or wish to make a complaint.

Many children and young people are able to grow up alongside their brothers and sisters as a result of the work this agency carries out. Meaningful contact is also promoted between children who are unable to live together. Foster carers receive training in managing contact arrangements and manage this skilfully and in the best interests of the children. For example, taking photographs at these visits so that the children are able to maintain these memories. Young people also keep memory boxes, ensuring that important mementoes of their time with their foster families are kept safely. Agency staff will also complete life-story work when young people need additional information about their past. Some young people benefit from permanent placement with their foster families, with some resulting in the additional security of legal permanence, such as adoption. Consequently, young people are thriving with a sense of security and stability, enabling them to reach their full potential.

Staff see young people regularly in their foster families and formally seek their views about their care as part of their foster carers' annual review process. Comments received include, 'if it wasn't for my foster carer I wouldn't have a better life' and 'X (foster carer) makes me happy when I'm sad or lonely.' Staff also facilitate a young people's forum, 'Forward together', which gives young people over the age of 13 years the opportunity to meet together. Staff also use this forum to impart information to young people and to seek their views. For example, this group formulated a number of questions for the Fostering panel to ask potential carers at the time of their approval.

The agency's education adviser supports foster carers to identify the most suitable schools for children who need to move or at the point of transition to high school. She is also able to support foster carers when challenges, such as exclusion, arise. Young people's progress is monitored from their starting points and resources are challenged to help those that are struggling. This helps to ensure that young people meet their potential and do not fall behind their peers. Similarly, staff have access to health advice from a qualified nurse. She ensures that young people's health care plans effectively meet their needs and is a helpful source of up-to-date health advice. For example, reminding staff and foster carers about the recent change in the law, in relation to smoking in cars when a person under 18 years is present.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Staff have a good understanding of the needs of children and young people who require foster placements. Consequently, they are able to undertake targeted recruitment. For example, the agency have had a specific drive on the recruitment of black foster carers. However, transracial placements do take place. When such placement are made, young people receive support to maintain their own faith and customs as their foster carers source the information and support they need to promote these. The number of approved fostering households has remained stable

over the last three years.

The initial preparation, training and assessment of foster carers is thorough. Assessments are evidence based and contain clear social work analysis about the likelihood of the applicants being able to undertake the fostering task. Applications are progressed in a timely manner, as the agency employs a small number of independent assessors in order to avoid applicants having to wait.

The organisation has recently reviewed and changed the way that they manage initial enquiries, preparation, assessment and approval. These tasks are now managed by a national team, along with the referral and matching process. However, it is too early to predict the success of this new initiative as families have yet to proceed through to approval. The new procedure does allow supervising social workers additional time to devote to supporting their approved foster families. Although, support to foster carers is already identified by carers themselves as a strength of the agency. Those spoken to during the inspection, spoke positively about the support they receive, including out-of-hours. A foster carer who has moved to the agency from a different fostering provider commented, 'The difference in support is massive. My support worker will even take my child to school if I'm unable to.'

The agency has an appropriate central list of fostering panel members. The panel chair is independent of the agency and is suitably experienced. Panel minutes demonstrate that the panel scrutinises reports presented and are confident in their recommendations. There is an effective process for agreeing the panel minutes that avoids delay in the decision making process. The agency decision is made within required timescales. However, the qualifying determination and decision making process has become blurred and the agency decisions maker's own reasons for his decision are not always clearly expressed. These factors are important in cases when foster carers are not in agreement with the agency's plans.

A range of training opportunities are available to approved foster carers. The vast majority of foster carers approved for over twelve months have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards. Foster carers are able to access specific training in order for them to meet the needs of the young people that they are caring for, such as self-injurious behaviour. However, a small minority of foster carers have not completed their core training within the period specified by the agency or have not completed update training courses. The agency's expectations with regard to both carers completing training is also unclear. Even when the annual review process identifies this as a concern, little improvement is evident in some instances. The agency plans to incentivise this post approval training.

Foster carers' reviews are held annually. These are independently chaired and minutes evidence the skills of the foster carers and the challenges they have faced over the previous twelve months. The views of the foster carers and of the children and young people in placement inform these reviews. Although children's social workers appear to be asked for their contributions, these are rarely received. However, the manager's monitoring has not identified this as an issue and she has not escalated her concerns with the appropriate local authorities, as their views are

significant in this process.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The safety and welfare of children and young people is clearly a priority of the agency. Children and young people enjoy safe and secure foster placements. The agency staff are familiar to children and young people, as visits routinely take place when they are at home. They say that they would be happy to express any concerns to the agency's staff. Details about how to raise a concern or complaint are also clear in the children's guide to fostering that young people receive when placed in foster care. This ensures that young people have the opportunity to express any concerns, should they wish to do so. A minimum of one unannounced visit takes place to each foster home annually, so that the agency can be confident in the standards of care afforded to young people at all times.

Allegations and disclosures are dealt with safely by the agency. They work well with other agencies with a safeguarding responsibility when such situations occur. Independent support is available for foster carers who are the subject of any allegation. The agency share information appropriately with other agencies following the outcome of any investigation. This ensures that the safety and welfare of children and young people receives priority.

Although the agency has established procedures for the safe recruitment of staff, these have not always been adhered to. The organisation has recently introduced a manager's checklist. This is designed to identify when there are any gaps in the information provided or reference checks, prior to offering employment to an individual. However, in one case examined during the inspection it was evident that gaps in employment had not been followed up, and in another that additional checks had not been completed for an individual who had worked abroad. Swift action was taken to address the issues identified. However, the process is not yet sufficiently robust, as the agency has not sought additional verification in all instances.

Individualised safe caring policies and risk assessments outlining the specific risk areas for each young person, help to ensure that foster carers implement protective strategies in order to keep young people safe. Foster carers also demonstrate a good understanding about the impact of a child's previous experience of neglect or abuse on their development and current presentation. Some young people continue to place themselves at risk by going missing from their foster placements. In these cases, the agency inform the appropriate bodies and escalate their concerns to a strategy meeting if required. The agency has a missing from home protocol, although the local police have not agreed this, and frequently young people do not have the opportunity to meet with an independent individual on their return to the foster home. Although the agency's social workers frequently complete a visit to the young person, managers have not made representation to placing authorities about their responsibilities in these cases.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The Registered Manager is appropriately qualified and experienced. She has been managing the agency for over two years. She gained her level five management qualification in February 2015. The agency's Responsible Individual joined the organisation less than six months ago. His review of the organisation has identified a number of areas for improvement, including some of the issues raised as part of this inspection. Thus demonstrating a desire to drive forward improvement.

The Registered Manager promptly submits the annual quality and performance data returns to Ofsted. She also produces quarterly reports for the directors so that they are able to monitor the progress and development of the agency. However, these have not been submitted to Ofsted as required, and they do not currently include details of consultation with foster carers, children placed or their social workers.

No requirements or recommendations resulted from the agency's last inspection. However, there is a targeted development plan in place. This is subject to regular review and update to ensure that action is being taken to address identified shortfalls. This demonstrates the agency's enthusiasm to sustain improvement. The agency's Statement of Purpose is also subject to regular review and is available on the agency's website. The agency operates in accordance with this.

Staff receive regular supervision and feel well supported by their immediate managers. Supervising social workers are qualified and experienced. They are able to make best use of their own skills and interests. They have manageable caseloads and receive good assistance from support workers and specialist advisors. This ensures they are in the best position to provide meaningful support to foster carers and young people.

Staff receive regular performance appraisal and objectives are set for year ahead. However, the system in place for panel members' appraisals has not been effective at ensuring that these take place at least annually and some appraisal records were missing from their files. Hence, any performance or developmental needs may take longer to acknowledge and address.

Staff are able to demonstrate, on an individual basis, the progress made and positive outcomes achieved by the young people they work with. However, current monitoring systems do not allow the Registered Manager to have a strategic oversight of this. Thus, it is difficult for the agency to demonstrate the positive impact that the agency has had on young people's progress, or to identify any particularly vulnerable groups, as there are no measureable outcomes.

The agency make appropriate notifications to Ofsted regarding significant events. They ensure that follow-up actions are taken and update those involved with the outcome of any investigations.

The agency has positive relationships with those commissioning its services. They report that communication with staff is good and are particularly positive about the agency's success at maintaining children in their school placements. One commissioner commented, 'The agency is very responsive to our need. They respond quickly to our requests. We view them as a supportive agency.'

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.