

ISP Sussex

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Melissa McMillan
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Registered manager	Mr Paul Shadbolt
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Date of last inspection	24 August 2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Integrated Services Programme (ISP) Sussex is a separately registered independent fostering agency, which is part of a larger childcare organisation based in England. The headquarters is situated in Sittingbourne, Kent. Carers provide long- and short-term, emergency, respite and parent-and-child care. ISP Sussex provides social work support and supervision to foster carers, educational support and assistance with contact between children and their birth families. The organisation provides a network of intensive therapeutic support via trained therapists and psychology and psychiatric services. At the time of this inspection, ISP Sussex had 58 approved foster care households with 43 children placed.

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**

Children and young people receive high quality, holistic care through direct access to specialist support. The agency employs a variety of professionals, including social workers, therapists and educational coordinators to support carers in providing care to children and young people who have complex and challenging needs. As a result of this extensive support, children and young people benefit from stable placements, where they are able to develop secure relationships and to flourish.

From their starting points, each child and young person has made effective and sustained progress. The multi-professional approach of the agency means that children and young people are supported to overcome difficulties and to achieve positive change. As a result, children and young people gain a more positive self-

view and develop stronger emotional resilience, resulting in significant improvements in their confidence, behaviour and social interactions.

Foster carers provide a warm, caring and stimulating atmosphere in which children and young people thrive. They feel safe and are able to develop strong trusting relationships with their carers. Children and young people feel part of the family and are able to remain in placement for as long as they need. This is reinforced by the agency's 'centre approach', which provides a base for children and young people and their carers to visit on a regular basis to receive therapeutic support, practical support or take part in groups or training. As a result, there are strong relationships throughout the agency, creating a family feel and a sense of belonging for children and young people.

The agency's recruitment processes ensure that they have a range of foster carers with a variety of skills and abilities to meet the complex needs of the children and young people they support. However, assessments of applicants do not always explore the previous history of potential foster carers or consider the impact of their history on their parenting skills or ability to foster. Foster carers are viewed as professionals and an integral part of the team around the child or young person. They attend network meetings with all other professionals involved, including the placing authority and the child's or young person's school. They also attend looked after children reviews and personal education plans, to share their knowledge and experience of the child or young person in order to review progress and to inform planning and decision-making.

Carers have access to supervision and training. However, foster carers have up to two years to complete mandatory training and their developmental needs are not discussed within supervision or annual reviews. As a result, children and young people could be placed with carers who have not had training to meet their specific needs. This could result in children and young people not receiving the support they need to make progress or keep safe. There was no evidence found of this having a detrimental effect on the care provided to children and young people, but the manager is aware of these concerns and is reviewing how training will be provided in the future. Other areas identified for improvement include ensuring that risk assessments and recruitment procedures are robust and that safeguarding and missing procedures are reviewed, as currently they do not reflect good safeguarding practices. However, no negative impact was found as a result of these deficits during this inspection.

Partnership working is exceptional. Managers, staff and carers work proactively and positively with others, offering professional challenge when necessary, while working together to ensure that the needs of each child or young person are met to the highest possible standard. Children's and young people's views are fundamental to the service. Their opinions or concerns are taken extremely seriously and the manager will act on them to improve their experience and the service as a whole.

The registered manager shows exceptional leadership. He demonstrates extensive knowledge and experience of working with children and young people. He has

embedded an ethos where the welfare of the child or young person is paramount and this is disseminated throughout the entire agency.

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
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that – the welfare of children placed or to be placed is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This is with specific reference to ensuring that all risk assessments are of an adequate quality and advise of the actions that should be taken to minimise the identified risks. (Regulation 11 (a))	18 May 2016
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which – is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect. This is specific to linking with other policies and procedures concerned with protecting children, including information on those seeking asylum, forced marriages and female genital mutilation as well as policies on Child sexual exploitation and radicalisation. (Regulation 12 (1)(a))	18 May 2016
The fostering service provider must ensure that all person's employed by them – receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. In particular that designated safeguarding leads receive the training necessary for this role. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	31 May 2016

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- ensure that in all cases the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. In particular, achieve greater consistency in the quality of the analysis in

assessments (NMS 13.7)

- ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure that the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required (NMS 15.1)
- ensure that appointees to the role of registered manager who do not have the management qualification (above) must enrol on a management training course within six months, and obtain a relevant management qualification within three years of their appointment (NMS 17.3)
- ensure that the fostering provider can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice, and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. In particular, verify the reasons why the applicant left previous employment with children and vulnerable adults (NMS 19.2)
- ensure that when a child is found after a missing event they are offered an independent return interview (Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care, January 2014, paragraph 32, page 14).

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people develop strong attachments to their foster carers, they feel safe with them and they trust them. This enables them to have a positive family experience, where they feel cared for and valued. Children and young people commented 'that they are the best carers that we could ever have'. The extensive support offered by the agency ensures that children's and young people's placements are maintained, offering long-term stability where children and young people can remain for as long as they need care. A small minority of placements have unplanned endings, but the majority of children are moved to other foster carers within the agency and are able to keep in touch with their previous carers. This allows children and young people to maintain attachments and supports them to learn how relationships can be sustained after challenging periods.

The 'centre approach' creates a family feel where everyone feels part of the organisation and creates a sense of belonging for children and young people. Children and young people said that the agency 'is the best place to be if you are in care'. Through the holistic support provided by the agency, children and young people are enabled to develop their confidence and self-esteem. Consequently, they make exceptional progress in all areas of their development, including education, social skills and behaviour, as well as their independence skills.

Children's and young people's emotional and psychological well-being is addressed through the agency's therapeutic-based model, which includes direct access to specialist support. Due to the quality of such interventions, children and young people gain a more positive self-view and develop stronger emotional resilience, resulting in improvements in their behaviour and interactions with others. The agency embraces multi-agency working through network meetings. Professionals work together to educate and develop children's and young people's awareness of the risks associated with certain behaviours, such as self-harm and criminal behaviour. Such an approach enables them to reduce significantly the negative ways they previously dealt with feelings of stress, anxiety or frustration.

Children's and young people's physical health is promoted to an excellent standard. Foster carers support children and young people to attend all medical appointments and provide education on healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. As a result, some children and young people have lost significant amounts of weight, which is having an extremely positive impact on their well-being, while other's stress-related illnesses have reduced.

All children and young people are in full-time education and all have improved their attendance at school significantly. This is outstanding given the size of the agency and the children's and young people's starting points. Children and young people go on to achieve in a variety of subjects. The use of education coordinators ensures that

they all have access to appropriate educational provision and increases joined up working to support them to meet their academic potential.

The agency provides an extensive range of activities for children and young people, including residential trips, a drama club and a gardening club. Every child and young person spoken with advised of their enjoyment and appreciation of these activities. The activities also provide opportunities for children and young people to develop relationships with others in the agency, extending their social network and adding to the family feel of the service. Carers promote children's and young people's hobbies and interests and support them to develop their independence through completing daily living skills. This enables children and young people to have new experiences, to develop new skills and to build on their confidence in preparation for adult life.

Children's and young people's voices are pivotal to the service. They feel listened to and the agency acts on what children and young people have said. Children and young people feel able to make complaints and know that they will receive a response. When children and young people have made suggestions, the management has used these to improve the service. This included the development of a 'children who foster' group, which provides an opportunity for birth children to come together and support each other. Staff at the agency take their roles as advocates extremely seriously and will challenge on behalf of children and young people to ensure that they receive the best possible service.

Children and young people receive carers' profiles which provide information on foster carers, their home and their family, as well as their hobbies and interests. Transitions into the foster family are done at the child's or young person's pace. When possible, children and young people are able to meet with their new carers over a number of weeks so that they can get to know each other and promote a successful transition.

The agency understands the importance of contact for children and young people and the centre provides facilities for this to take place. As a result, children and young people know that they are able to have contact where they feel comfortable and safe.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency provides excellent care to children and young people who have experienced significant trauma in their lives. Staff and carers are extremely motivated and committed to providing exceptional care. As a result, children and young people make significant progress in their academic, social and emotional development.

The agency recruits foster carers with a range of skills and backgrounds. However

due to the demographic of the area that the agency recruits from, there is a low number of carers from ethnic minorities. The manager is aware of this and is reviewing the agency's recruitment strategy to improve the situation. Foster carers ensure that children's and young people's culture is promoted and carers support them to learn about their backgrounds to develop their sense of identity.

The assessment process ensures that the agency recruits people with the abilities and skills to care for children and young people. However, a minority of assessments lacked exploration of applicants' past histories, their views or how this may influence their parenting style and their ability to foster. This means that the agency may not fully consider how these factors may affect the applicant's ability to care for children or young people with specific needs. This could lead to children and young people being placed in unsuitable placements. The panel has identified this and fed it back to the manager who is taking action to address this.

Panel members have a variety of expertise and they carry out the panel's quality assurance function effectively to ensure that only suitable applicants are recommended for approval. However, the minutes of the panel are not robust and do not record discussions, decisions and reasons for recommendations clearly. It is therefore not always evident in the minutes why the panel has made the recommendation they have. This has been identified by the manager, who is taking action to address this.

The agency has a team dedicated to considering referrals and the ability of carers to meet the needs of children and young people. The agency's matching tool allows for the agency to evidence why a carer would be suited to support the child or young person. However, the matching tool is not always used effectively to identify any deficits in the carers' skills and how these can be remedied. If not improved, this may result in children and young people being placed with carers who do not have the knowledge necessary to support their particular needs.

Carers are respected as professionals within the organisation. They have access to training and can access support groups, reflective practice groups and therapist consultations to develop their understanding of the children and young people they support. Carers within the agency are highly knowledgeable about the individuals they care for and provide the right environment for them to feel valued and part of the family.

Carers receive regular supervision from their supervising social worker and the fostering adviser. This and the use of network meetings ensure that all professionals involved in children's and young people's care are able to reflect on their progress and devise strategies together. However, deficits in carers' training are not identified through supervision. This is compounded by the agency's training programme, which allows carers two years to complete the agency's mandatory training in subjects such as safeguarding, safer care and first aid. If not remedied, this may result in children and young people being placed with carers who may not have had the training to provide them with the knowledge and understanding to meet their needs and protect

them.

Carers and staff work effectively together to provide high levels of care to the children and young people they support. They liaise regularly with all other professionals involved, including the placing authority, to ensure that strategies remain effective and children and young people are enabled to progress. Regular meetings ensure that the manager and staff have oversight of practice and all individual children and young people within the organisation. This means that any trends and patterns can be identified and strategies put in place to minimise risk and to support children and young people to develop.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Carers and staff take their responsibility to safeguard children and young people extremely seriously. They foster supportive and trusting relationships where children and young people feel able to share their concerns. Carers take action to protect children and young people and report concerns to the appropriate authorities. Staff and carers have strong relationships with other agencies and work closely with them to promote children's and young people's safety.

Children's and young people's progress is monitored through weekly meetings by the manager and through network meetings with all the professionals involved. This ensures that all agencies are aware of any risks and work together to devise strategies to support children and young people to keep safe. The agency arranges for subject matter experts to provide education to children and young people on the risks of engaging in activities such as criminal behaviour or substance misuse, and this is reiterated by carers. As a result, children and young people reduce and cease their engagement in risk-taking activities.

The agency has a policy in place for supporting children and young people with challenging behaviour and carers receive training in de-escalation techniques. Carers focus on de-escalation and distraction when supporting children or young people with challenging behaviour. This approach, along with the agency's therapeutic model, is effective in supporting children and young people to express themselves more positively. This has resulted in no incidents requiring a physical intervention for some time.

A safeguarding policy is in place to inform staff and carers on what to do if they suspect a child is at risk of harm. However, it does not inform staff of risks relating to child sexual exploitation, radicalisation, female genital mutilation, forced marriages or children seeking asylum. The agency has recently introduced separate policies for child sexual exploitation and radicalisation, but these are not referred to in the policy.

As a result, staff are not adequately informed on how to respond to these risks. The designated safeguarding officer has not received training in this role, which may affect his ability to respond to concerns appropriately.

Risk assessments outline the risks factors associated with each child or young person. However, they do not provide information on the preventative strategies required to minimise these risks to each child. As a result, carers are not informed through these assessments of the actions that they should take to protect children and young people.

Children and young people do go missing from the service. Carers follow procedures and inform the police and placing authority. Episodes of missing are analysed and strategies are reviewed to ensure that they remain effective. As a result, incidents of missing for individuals reduce. The agency has a procedure in place to outline the agency's response to missing incidents. However, this provides limited information on independent return interviews for children or young people who have been missing. Some individuals who have been missing are not receiving return interviews from an independent person on their return. This means that opportunities to identify why a child or young person left may be missed, particularly if the reason is in relation to their carer or agency.

The matching process does not identify deficits in the carer's knowledge or skills to meet the needs of the child or young person. This is not followed up in supervision or the carer's annual reviews. The agency's records indicate that carers are not having regular training to meet the needs of the children or young people they support. This includes training on child sexual exploitation, missing and self-harm. New carers have up to two years to complete formal safeguarding training and may have placements in the meantime. This means the agency cannot be certain that carers have been provided with the knowledge necessary to promote the welfare of children and young people and to safeguard them.

Recruitment procedures do not evidence the action the agency has taken to verify the reasons prospective employees left their previous employment with children or vulnerable adults. This needs addressing to ensure that their procedures are fully robust.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The registered manager has been in post since September 2015 and was registered in January 2016. He has extensive knowledge and experience of working with children and young people. However, he has yet to complete a management qualification. This has not hindered his management ability. The manager takes a hands-on approach and regularly speaks with and visits children and young people and their carers. The manager's priority is to ensure that children and young people

have a positive family experience where they are able to have fun. Children and young people were extremely positive about their relationship with the manager and appreciate the time he takes to get to know them. Foster carers and staff value his input and say that he is visible and approachable. He fosters a culture where the child or young person is paramount and has embedded a supportive family approach to the agency. Every member feels part of a team working towards the best interests of the child.

The manager leads an extremely skilled and committed team, and although the agency has recently undergone a lot of change, the staff and carers continue to provide excellent care to ensure that children and young people are able to make exceptional progress.

The registered manager and staff have effective relationships with other agencies and provide forums to meet regularly to discuss and reflect on children's and young people's progress, the strategies in place and the additional support they may need to improve the quality of care provided. The registered manager effectively advocates on behalf of children and young people when it is in the agency's view that the support provided or longer-term plans are not in the child's or young person's best interests.

The registered manager values the views of all those involved in the service and ensures that children and young people and carers are able to have a say in how the service is improved. Children and young people and carers advised that they feel listened to and part of an 'agency that they are proud of'. The registered manager is committed to drive continuous improvement in the quality of the service to enable children and young people to achieve positive outcomes. As a result, he has introduced surveys to obtain feedback, and weekly meetings to discuss children's and young people's progress. He has also created a further fostering adviser post to improve the support provided to carers. Foster carers have advised that they particularly value the fostering adviser's role and appreciate the support offered by someone who has experience as a foster carer.

The registered manager has a good oversight of the service. He carries out regular audits and professionals' meetings to analyse and evaluate practice so that he can identify areas for improvement. The registered manager has recently implemented changes to the oversight of carers' training. This should improve carers' access to training to enable them to better support children's and young people's specific needs. The registered manager is also in the process of reviewing the agency's statement of purpose to reflect better the agency's therapeutic model and the 'centre' approach. However, monitoring systems need to be developed further, to ensure that areas like those identified for improvement within this report are recognised and addressed swiftly.

Staff feel supported by the registered manager and receive regular team meetings, reflective group sessions and supervision. These provide regular opportunities to reflect on and improve their practice. Staff are extremely committed to providing good, consistent support to children and young people and their foster carers. They

have access to regular training and the manager supports them to develop their knowledge and skills to ensure that the service that they provide is of the highest quality to enable children and young people to reach their 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.