

SWAP Foster Care

Social Work Assessment Partners Ltd
43-47 Kings Street, Bedworth, Warwickshire CV12 8NB
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately run agency provides foster care to 33 children, increased from 21 a year ago. It has 38 carers in 21 households. The vast majority of children are in long-term placements, but some are in short-term placements or parent and baby placements.

Inspection dates: 30 May to 5 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 7 November 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The vast majority of children do well and live in long-term placements.
- The agency undertakes effective matching of children with carer households.
- The agency recruits good carers and staff.
- Carers help children to progress educationally by supporting their learning. School attendance levels are high and carers encourage children to be ambitious.
- Children form meaningful relationships with their carers and their social networks. This is the basis of their stable placements and emotional progress.
- Children and carers are treated as though they are part of a large family. Consultation is thorough.
- Enjoyment is key. Children have new experiences and improve their self-confidence.
- Children learn to stay safe and there are relatively few negative or dangerous incidents.
- The agency benefits from experienced and conscientious leadership. Insightful critique occurs at all levels, including panel.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Improvements are required to the filing of records and the training of carers.
- Important documents, including the statement of purpose and risk assessments, are not always up to date or used effectively.
- The agency does not always escalate concerns about local authorities effectively enough. However, in most regards, these shortfalls have an indirect or low impact on children.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Ensure that the registered provider and the registered manager carry on and manage the fostering agency with sufficient skill. This is with regard to having a secure filing system. (Regulation 8(1)b)	18/09/2017
Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This is with regard to drafting and maintaining suitable risk assessments. (Regulation 11(a))	17/07/2017
Provide foster parents with such training as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. This is with regard to all carers. (Regulation 17(1))	18/09/2017

Recommendations

- Support foster carers to make reasonable and appropriate decisions within the authority delegated to them, without having to seek consent unnecessarily. This is with regard to obtaining comprehensive written permission and escalating concerns rigorously. (NMS 7.4)
- Ensure the reviews of each carer include an appraisal of performance against clear and consistent standards set by the agency, and consideration of training and development needs, which are documented in the review report. The foster carer's personal development plan is reviewed and the effectiveness of training and development is evaluated. (NMS 20.6)
- Keep a written record detailing the time, date, and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision. (NMS 24.5)
- Implement a system to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. (NMS 26.2)
- Record information about the child clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child when they access their file now or in the future. This is with regard to their

matching documents. (NMS 26.6)

- Compile a statement of purpose, which sets out the aims and objectives of the service as a whole, and the service and facilities that are provided (including the provision of any 'parent and child arrangements'). The statement must be reviewed and updated as necessary, but at least annually and published on the provider's website, with a copy provided to Ofsted. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 4.1)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children have the benefit of individualised support from dedicated carers. The agency has approved over a third of households for only one child, which is substantially more than the national average. In addition, carers tend to have specific rather than general terms of approval. As a result, carers have an impressive understanding of the children. The vast majority of children experience carefully planned placements, which is the basis of their lasting relationships with their foster carers. Very few children experience the disruption of a placement breakdown. An independent reviewing officer said, 'The foster carer is very experienced and makes a difficult job seem joyful!' However, some children's records do not explain this process clearly enough for when they access their files, either now or in the future. Those children who have linguistic or cultural needs receive the necessary support to integrate effectively and benefit from wide-ranging opportunities. Carers and staff address children's religious needs, such as those arising currently from observing Ramadan. Children feel positive about their care. One said, 'I'm really glad I'm here. My carer helps me through everything. I trust her.' A member of staff said, 'They're all happy kids who are meeting their targets.' An external professional wrote recently, 'I'm very pleased. The carers and agency make a positive difference to my child's life.' Almost all the respondents to internal and external surveys feel the service is good or excellent.

The agency places great emphasis on consulting children and carers about their feelings, and their views on new ideas. This is intrinsic to the service and influences decisions about activities, matching of other children and displays in the office, as well as children's own lives. A panel member said, 'Children are actively involved in the life of the agency.' Consultation is ongoing. Currently, discussions are under way about how to involve older children in learning independence skills. The manager is considering how to capture the evidence of young people's influence on the agency. The agency uses social media extensively to communicate with carers and children, although the website showing the statement of purpose is not up to date. This creates a risk of providing inaccurate information and advice.

The directors expect carers to commit to the long-term care of children and this successfully occurs for over 90% of children. This is a substantial achievement. There are very few disruptions or placement breakdowns. Transitions are nearly always positive. This provides the security that children need in order to benefit from the wide-ranging opportunities on offer, both socially and educationally. One child is aiming to learn to swim before going on a foreign holiday, and another is succeeding in martial arts. Children and carers are involved in the agency's support of local charities. Children learn that they have a role in supporting their communities. Carers note children's emotional progress and growing self-confidence. One child recently felt ready to attend counselling, many have gained a positive attitude to education, and another speaks in a calmer way that others find acceptable. An older child has obtained a job at a café. One child said, 'My carer is very supportive and understands if I am not well.' An independent reviewing officer recently wrote, 'The

carers provide outstanding support with managing children's feelings.'

The vast majority of children are from nearby authorities. This means it is relatively easy for them to keep in touch with their families. They sustain valuable social connections, which help when older children make their transitions to greater independence.

Children and carers express great frustration with some local authorities. Carers and supervising social workers pursue these issues with the local authorities concerned. However, there are occasionally shortfalls that affect children directly, including excessive turnover of social workers and lack of progress in making decisions. One child has had three social workers in a few months; another has waited too long for a passport, and another needs permission to see her mother. Although supervising social workers address the level of delegated authority provided by placing authorities to carers on each child's admission, it is not always sufficiently clear in records or practice. Similarly, the methods of escalating shortfalls lack rigour. This means that the agency is not doing as much as possible to meet children's needs in this area.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children benefit from a high level of safety and feel safe in their foster homes. After settling in, the vast majority do not place themselves at risk and are not at risk of exploitation or extremism. They increasingly learn to keep themselves safe. Some children make sufficient emotional progress to decide to stay away from familiar situations and individuals. The agency staff liaise well with fellow professionals about any concerns. They improve their own practices, in light of such discussions. Recently, for example, staff have started to include helpful evaluations in their notifications to Ofsted. This ethos means that children can flourish. A social worker commented that her child was 'being allowed to be a child again'. Children learn to establish safe friendships.

External professionals confirm that the manager has an 'excellent knowledge of safeguarding procedures'. For example, he does not hesitate to address poor practice in staff and carers when children make allegations. Carers know how to get support in these rare circumstances. The agency ensures that carers receive the support and training that they need to help children understand the risks they face, including those posed online. A local authority social worker wrote about one household, 'There is an excellent safety plan in place. The carer has a good understanding of how to keep children safe. The homely atmosphere combines safety and comfort.'

Staff and carers have a good understanding of the evolving risks that a minority of children face, including those who are placed with a parent. They communicate closely with those children and consistently demonstrate concern for their welfare. However, their written risk assessments and associated protocols are not always up to date or prescriptive. For example, for children who go missing. This reduces the value of this important process to carers and supervising social workers.

Foster carers demonstrate constructive conflict resolution techniques to children who have learnt to be adversarial. One carer said, 'We try to make living here fun. We don't want it to be like a soap opera!' They avoid major incidents by de-escalating situations and very rarely resort to any sort of physical intervention. A local authority social worker said, '[He] was not an easy child to deal with due to challenging behaviours and pushing boundaries. However, the foster carers remained positive at all times and put his needs first, doing the best they could to meet them.' This means that children learn to resolve difficulties positively.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The last inspection concluded that the service was good but that leadership and management required improvements. No requirements arose and reasonable progress has occurred on the recommendations that were made. This inspection finds that the key to several shortfalls is the system of recording. The directors have implemented an electronic system, but documents are not secure from tampering, and filing is poor in parts. There is insufficient monitoring of records. Some documents are incomplete, unnecessarily duplicated, or absent. Signatures are absent on most documents so they cannot be authenticated. These shortfalls obscure children's journeys through the agency and create difficulties for practitioners. In the event of a legal challenge, the system may not support the agency adequately.

The manager is qualified and highly experienced, and provides principled leadership to the service. A deputy manager is in post. With some exceptions, they implement a reasonably robust system for monitoring the operation of the service. Staff receive regular supervision, hold favourable caseloads, and enjoy a high level of mutual support, which reflects the inclusive ethos of the company. As one panel member pointed out, 'It's not hierarchical.' At their meetings, staff check that every child is making progress. Records of the manager's supervision meetings with the responsible individual are not in place, as required. The manager and responsible individual are married, so they are considering ways to introduce an element of independent expertise to the manager's supervision and to the monitoring of the service.

The company is successfully reflecting its statement of purpose and achieving its targets in terms of increasing the number of carer households and staff. It has an excellent profile among a small number of nearby local authorities. Commissioners use terms such as 'fantastic foster carers', and 'wonderful placement'. Overall, there is good continuity of staffing. A supervising social worker said, 'I can watch children grow up here.' Carers receive thorough support at all times of the day and night from people they know well. One social worker said, 'The supervising social workers always come to meetings and are well prepared.' Carers from the agency have received public awards acknowledging their contribution to fostering for three consecutive years. Individuals throughout the agency call it a 'family'.

Through regular newsletters and emails, the administrator and manager, in particular, provide staff and carers with an impressive flow of information. This includes links to websites and data about specific issues such as meeting the needs

of children from overseas or those who have disabilities. Resource materials are available at the office too. This access to information supplements the excellent support carers receive from their supervising social workers. The manager has recently extended training opportunities to include an online provider. However, the extensive training programme for carers has key flaws. It does not cover all the issues identified in the national minimum standards, or include all carers. Of particular concern is the fact that a small number of carers have not engaged in the training programme. These are so-called 'second' carers, who often have other jobs. The presence in their household of a 'main carer' reduces the risks. However, there is no distinction between carers in the regulations. Some have not completed all the mandatory courses, including managing challenging behaviour, health and hygiene, first aid, and medicine administration. The agency has not trained carers about preventing radicalisation or about reporting suspicions of female genital mutilation. These shortfalls affect the carers' ability to care for children and the capacity of the agency to monitor their development, for example at their annual reviews. The manager is undertaking a review of the foster carers' agreement to reflect this issue.

The agency serves new foster carers well. Several carers have come from other agencies and appreciate the differences. One carer said, 'They have more than lived up to expectations.' Existing carers often initiate the referral of households they know. This leads to an exceptionally high conversion rate of enquiries to applications compared to the national average. Very few fail to reach panel and the decision-maker approves all that do. This is a rigorous, efficient, and effective process. The supervising social workers undertake all of the assessments. This process establishes close working relationships between staff, the carers, and the carers' families. All carers are positive about the support the agency provides, including the regular meetings in spacious offices. Further work is under way on the foster carer's handbook. Carers' own children are fully included in events and discussions. Their input into the agency naturally varies through time.

The panel operates well. Its members bring a wealth of experience and expertise to the agency. The minutes are clear and panel members attend training and social events. They have a good understanding of the agency.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people, and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how

well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC409413

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