

Asphaleia Ltd

Asphaleia Ltd

22 Liverpool Gardens, Worthing, West Sussex BN11 1RY

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Asphaleia Limited is a private fostering agency. It is part of a charitable organisation that delivers other community-based support projects for children and young people. There are seven approved fostering households and five children in placement. Long- and short-term fostering services are provided.

Inspection dates: 17 to 19 July 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	inadequate
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	inadequate
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	inadequate
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There are serious and/or widespread failures that mean children and young people are not protected or their welfare is not promoted or safeguarded and/or the care and experiences of children and young people are poor and they are not making progress.

Date of last inspection: 27 October 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is inadequate because:

- Staff failed to assess the potential for children to harm one another in one placement, and take effective action to keep them safe.
- The assessment and management of risk are weak.
- Leaders and managers have failed to ensure that all relevant information pertaining to the needs and safety of children is obtained prior to matching them with foster carers.
- Children who have complex needs have not consistently received the specialist support needed to minimise the potential for them to escalate harmful behaviours.
- Some foster carers have not received the training, advice and guidance needed to care for children who have complex needs in a timely manner.
- Staff have failed to ensure that effective planning to meet children's needs takes place following a serious incident.
- Quality of care monitoring systems have not consistently ensured that shortfalls in the standard of practice have been addressed.
- Progress towards ensuring that the fostering panel can function effectively has been slow.
- There are gaps in the agency's training programme.
- Insufficient priority is given to keeping children's personal information confidential.

The independent fostering agency's strengths :

- Children and young people who are eligible have access to other support projects delivered by the organisation.
- Many children and young people have made positive progress in relation to their education.
- The registered person demonstrates a strong commitment to developing more effective quality assurance systems.
- The agency works effectively with unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.
- Some positive work has been undertaken with children who have disclosed historic abuse.
- The agency is becoming more proactive in providing family-centred activities.
- A positive working relationship has been established with the local authority designated officer.

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
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(a))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that an assessment is undertaken of the suitability for children sharing bedrooms, prior to the placement being agreed, and ensure that foster carers have the experience and training necessary to prevent children from coming to harm.</p>	21/09/2017
<p>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, and sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12(1)(a)(b))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that risk assessments take into account the potential for all children in the home to be harmed, and ensure that safe care policies identify effective strategies for keeping children safe.</p> <p>Ensure written records are kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response. (Regulation 12(3)(d))</p>	21/09/2017
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that each child has access to such medical, nursing, psychological and psychiatric advice, treatment and other services as the child may require. (Regulation 15(2)(b))</p> <p>Specifically, where children are identified as requiring professional support to address sexually harmful behaviours, ensure that they receive an appropriate service in a timely manner.</p>	21/09/2017
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the</p>	21/09/2017

<p>interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that foster parents receive training relevant to the needs of children placed with them, complete all safeguarding training and receive timely advice related to meeting the specific needs of children.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child. (Regulation 17(3))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that the agency obtains a copy of a child's child protection plan and any specialist assessment reports, and shares the relevant information with foster parents.</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21(4)(a))</p> <p>Specifically, when weaknesses are identified in an employee's performance, such as completing quality assessment reports, ensure that the employee receives relevant training in a timely manner.</p>	21/09/2017
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. (Regulation 23(7))</p> <p>Specifically, take prompt action when there are insufficient members to ensure that the panel can perform effectively.</p>	21/09/2017
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. (Regulation 35(1)(b))</p> <p>Specifically, when quality monitoring systems, such as the safeguarding hub, identify concerns about the care being delivered, take prompt action to rectify the shortfall and ensure children's well-being.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35(2))</p>	21/09/2017

Recommendations

- Children can take up issues in the most appropriate way with support, without fear that this will result in any adverse consequences. (NMS 1.6)

Specifically, ensure that the complaints system is easily accessible to children and young people.

- The fostering service implements clear written policies and procedures on recruitment to, and maintenance of, the central list of persons considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel ("the central list") and on constitution of fostering panels. (NMS 14.1)

Specifically, ensure that there is a clear recruitment process for recruiting panel members, which includes the use of application forms and formal interviews.

- Foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. (NMS 20.5)

Specifically, ensure that all foster carers have up-to-date personal development plans.

- All foster carers have access to adequate social work and other professional support, information and advice, to enable them to provide consistent, high quality care to the child. This includes assistance with dealing with relevant services, such as health and education. Consideration is given to any help or support needed by the sons and daughters of foster carers. (NMS 21.6)

Specifically, ensure that the sons and daughters of foster carers have access to training, support and guidance as necessary.

- There is a good quality learning and development programme, which includes induction, post-qualifying and in-service training, that staff and volunteers are supported to undertake. The programme equips them with the skills required to meet the needs of the children, keeps them up-to-date with professional, legal and practice developments and reflects the policies, legal obligations and business needs of the fostering service. (NMS 23.1)

Specifically, take action to ensure that all staff are aware of the statutory guidance on children who go missing from home and care, and that the guidance is implemented in practice.

- Information about individual children is kept confidential and only shared with those who have a legitimate and current need to know the information, and to those parts of a child's record or other information that they need to know. (NMS 26.4)

Specifically, ensure that the use of electronic data and recording systems for sharing information does not compromise the confidentiality of children's records.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: inadequate

Since the last Ofsted inspection in October 2015, the agency has struggled to recover from the negative impact that the unexpected loss of the chief executive officer had on staff and foster carers. This has been compounded by competency issues leading to inconsistent management of the fostering service. Over the last year, a new registered person and manager have commenced in post, and the development work they have initiated is beginning to have positive results. However, practice since the last inspection has often been poor and, as a result, the well-being of children and young people has not consistently been promoted, and they have not always been protected from harm.

Practice has not been consistently strong in relation to matching children and young people with foster carers who have the experience and knowledge to meet their needs. In one case, this resulted in a sibling group with complex needs being placed with foster carers who were relatively inexperienced, and an incident occurred between the children that may have been preventable. There was a lack of understanding from staff and the foster carers about the needs and risks involved. Agency staff failed to obtain significant information, which would have enabled better matching and planning to meet the needs of the children. Action has been taken to improve the matching process, but this is yet to become fully embedded in practice.

Priority has not always been given to ensuring that children and young people receive specialist support to ensure their psychological well-being and to keep themselves safe. In one case reviewed by the inspectors, the placing authority's referral form clearly stated specific work that should be undertaken with the children, but staff were not proactive in ensuring that this work was happening. The physical health needs of children and young people are better catered for. Foster carers ensure that all medical appointments are kept, and they monitor children's and young people's medical conditions. Healthy lifestyles are promoted, so that children and young people understand the risks associated with smoking and not maintaining a balanced diet.

The organisation has not always been proactive in arranging activities that bring staff, carers and children together, or providing support and guidance to the sons and daughters of foster carers. However, practice in this area is improving under the leadership of the new manager. A recent 'bake off' event was enjoyed by all who attended, and it gave agency staff the opportunity to observe the relationships and interactions between children and their foster families. Leaders and managers are planning to deliver 'my family fosters' workshops for birth children later this year, and some of these children have recently attended workshops delivered by other projects within the organisation, on such topics as keeping safe and appropriate use of the internet.

In those cases reviewed by the inspectors, it was evident that the children and young people had developed positive relationships with their carers. In documents reviewed by the inspectors, independent reviewing officers often comment on the quality of attachments that children and young people build with their foster families. One young person who had been an unaccompanied asylum seeker told the inspector, 'My foster carers understood my story well.' Children and young people are included in family life, and foster carers work hard to ensure that they access a range of stimulating activities and new experiences. Historically, there have been some delays in arranging respite care for children and young people, where it is agreed that this would benefit the placement, but foster carers said that this is now improving.

Not all of the children and young people spoken to during this inspection were aware of how to make a complaint if they are unhappy about their care. The complaints system is not easily accessible. The children's and young people's guide advises them to contact the registered manager if they wish to complain. The guide would be strengthened by including the contact details for the external support agencies listed. The manager confirmed that the children's and young people's guide is currently being updated. Despite this shortfall, the staff are committed to helping children and young people to access services that will advocate for them, particularly in terms of their immigration status.

The organisation delivers other support projects to young people in the community. A strength of the fostering service is that young people who are fostered have automatic access to these projects. Some young people have benefited from the additional emotional support that the project workers have provided them with, and this has helped them build confidence and self-esteem. Project workers liaise well with the supervising social worker, foster carers and other professionals involved in the young person's care.

The organisation also has an established education and training programme for young people who are not in mainstream education. Young people who are fostered by the agency, and attend the training programme, have made good progress. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have improved their English and developed the knowledge and skills to live within cultural expectations. Many have developed skills to help them become independent. Foster carers work effectively with education professionals. They maintain strong links with schools, and this has ensured that children and young people with a history of difficulty in school have been able to engage more with their education.

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

All of the young spoken to during this inspection said that they feel safe in their foster homes and would feel comfortable speaking to their carers about any worries or concerns they may have. However, an examination of safeguarding practice since the last inspection in October 2015 identified a number of shortfalls that could have

resulted in children and young people not being protected from harm.

In one case, managers and staff failed to assess whether it would be appropriate for two siblings to share a bedroom, despite referral information indicating that this may not be in the children's best interests. Insufficient consideration was given to the potential for the children to harm one another. When a concerning incident did take place, agency staff did not take decisive action to minimise the risk.

The standard of risk assessment and risk management has, at times, been poor. Risk assessments have not always taken into account how the known behaviours of some young people could impact negatively on other young people visiting or staying in the home. Some risk assessments have failed to clearly define what strategies will be put in place to minimise the potential for children and young people coming to harm. Similarly, the 'safe care policy', developed between the supervising social worker and foster carers, has not always contained effective measures to prevent children from harming one another.

Recent developments in practice have resulted in a new risk assessment format being developed, although this is not yet fully embedded in practice.

Agency staff have not consistently ensured that they are provided with the information necessary to keep children and young people safe. For example, the inspectors identified two cases where copies of children's child protection plans had not been obtained. In another case, the agency failed to request a copy of a specialist assessment report pertaining to children's sexually harmful behaviour. Consequently, staff and foster carers were not fully aware of the risks associated with some children and young people, and this limited their ability to keep the children and young people safe.

There have been no concerns in relation to children and young people going missing from their foster homes. Foster carers spoken to during this inspection were familiar with procedures they should follow in the event of a missing episode. The agency staff were not immediately familiar with the statutory guidance on children who go missing from home and care and with their responsibility for ensuring that the guidance is put into practice. The statutory guidance is not referenced in the agency's policy on children and young people who go missing.

Children and young people are given advice and guidance on how to keep safe, and this includes keeping safe on the internet. Young people are able to access the organisation's other support projects, and this includes a project specifically focused on supporting young people who are at risk of exploitation. However, the agency failed to ensure that two vulnerable children, who were too young to access this project, received specialist support in a timely manner.

Foster carers are aware of the dangers that young people face in their local communities, particularly in relation to the discrimination that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can experience. The agency is committed to challenging discrimination, and has been effective in ensuring that the rights of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are upheld.

Child protection concerns are reported to the relevant agencies, although there was one occasion when this was not done until management monitoring of the case identified the shortfall. Managers have not consistently ensured that the agency is kept informed of the outcome of child protection referrals. For example, the inspectors could find no record of the actions agreed or taken after staff had reported that a young person made historic allegations of abuse. The recording of child protection issues is weak. A chronology of events and record of all actions taken is not kept in every case.

Other aspects of practice relating to child protection matters are stronger. One child who made a disclosure of historic abuse received excellent support from the foster carers. The carers were sensitive to the child's emotional needs and worked effectively with the professionals involved in the case.

Foster carers have the skills to help children and young people maintain appropriate boundaries, and over time the challenging behaviour of most children and young people reduces. There have been no concerns regarding the use of physical restraint, and the agency has taken firm action when there have been indications that carers have used unacceptable disciplinary techniques. Safe recruitment procedures are maintained in respect of agency staff, but the practice relating to the recruitment of foster panel members is not as strong. Currently, new panel members are not required to complete an application form, and they do not have a formal interview prior to appointment.

The assessment of potential foster carers has been an area of weakness. The fostering panel chairperson informed the inspectors that assessment reports have not always provided sufficient information and analysis to enable the panel members to conclude that the potential carer would be suitable for the role. In this respect, the fostering panel has played an effective role in ensuring that unsuitable applicants are not approved as foster carers.

Although the inspectors were concerned about the number and serious nature of some of the shortfalls relating to safeguarding children, some areas of practice have improved since the last inspection. A good working relationship with the local authority designated officer has been established, and practice relating to the investigation of allegations against carers has improved. In addition, the manager has taken steps to ensure that children and young people are seen alone by the supervising social worker at regular intervals, and this ensures that they have the opportunity to raise any concerns they may have about the care they are receiving.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

Since the last inspection in October 2015, there has been inconsistent management of the service. In 2016, the registered manager resigned from her post. A new manager was subsequently appointed, but left before becoming registered with Ofsted, partly as a result of senior managers identifying concerns about his suitability for the role. The current manager took up her post in January 2017, and

her application to become registered with Ofsted is being processed. She has significant experience working in independent fostering agencies, and holds a diploma in social work.

An experienced member of staff from within the organisation was appointed as the new registered person in May 2016. She has shown a strong commitment to developing the service, and has focused on the development of new quality assurance monitoring systems. These are not yet fully embedded in practice. For example, a new 'safeguarding hub' provides an opportunity to review all serious incidents. However, in September 2016, the manager raised concerns about the appropriateness of siblings sharing a bedroom. The 'safeguarding hub' considered the concerns raised by the manager, but this did not result in prompt action being taken. Similarly, case audits have not identified shortfalls such as children not being provided with the specialist support needed to keep them safe.

At the time of this inspection, the registered person and the manager were not familiar with the need to undertake quality of care reviews, and provide the chief inspector with a report. Consequently, no review reports have been submitted.

Processes are being developed to monitor the progress that children and young people make, although currently the strongest evidence of progress available to the inspectors were the minutes from children looked after review meetings. These indicate that most young people make progress across many aspects of their lives. Some practitioners from other support projects delivered by the organisation are familiar with children's progress monitoring systems and expressed a willingness to share their knowledge with colleagues providing the fostering service.

Leaders and managers have not consistently ensured that the care plans for children and young people meet their identified needs. In one case, no evidence could be found that the agency's plan for the child contained specific measures to ensure that the child received appropriate interventions to address harmful behaviours. Although staff build positive working relationships with placing authority social workers, the effectiveness of these relationships has not always been monitored or identified when the partnership is failing to ensure the well-being of children. Despite this, some evidence of good practice was identified. Staff worked effectively with one placing authority and subsequently presented a well-developed support package to stabilise a child's placement.

Since the last Ofsted inspection, leaders and managers have not consistently ensured that child-centred decisions have been taken when matching children and young people with foster carers. In one case this has resulted in children and young people who have complex needs being fostered by carers who are relatively inexperienced and who have not received adequate training to meet the children's specific needs. In recent months, a new matching process has been introduced. The process identifies the strengths and weaknesses of foster carers and records how they could meet the identified needs of children and young people.

Senior managers are prepared to challenge professionals who they perceive are not working in the best interests of children and young people. For example, the

recommendations made, following a child's looked after review, were challenged. Not all foster carers spoken to during this inspection were aware of the function of the independent review mechanism.

There have been significant delays in providing some essential training, both for staff and foster carers. This has included assessment and report writing training, and training for foster carers who are looking after children who display sexually harmful behaviours. Currently, the agency does not deliver training on female genital mutilation. The organisation specialises in caring for young people whose circumstances may have placed them at high risk of female genital mutilation. The inspectors also identified that not all foster carers have completed training on child sexual exploitation and the 'Prevent' duty in a timely manner. Despite these shortfalls, foster carers said that the quality of training has improved, particularly now that external trainers are more frequently used. Foster carers also welcome the opportunity to discuss their training in regular 'learning set' meetings.

Staff receive regular practice-based supervision. A supervising social worker stated that she is 'benefiting enormously' from the supervision now being provided by the new manager. The manager feels well supported and feels that the clinical supervision she receives from an independent professional is helping her settle into her new role. A collaborative working relationship has developed between the manager and the supervising social worker. Their close working relationship has meant that formalised team meetings have not always been prioritised.

The foster carers spoken to during this inspection expressed the view that the support they receive has improved since the new manager came into post, and they emphasised that their supervision is regular and helpful, even during periods of inconsistent management. They felt listened to when the organisation's managing director met with them individually to address the difficult relationships they had experienced with the previous manager. Foster carers' annual reviews are conducted in a timely manner, but there is no consistency in relation to the provision of professional development plans.

Since the last inspection, recruitment of foster carers has not been prioritised. This is attributable to the challenges presented by inconsistent management oversight. The agency does have a history of recruiting diverse carers that have successfully met the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and there is now a strong marketing and recruitment plan in place.

The foster panel chairperson works closely with agency managers. She does not have a significant role across all of the agency's quality assurance processes, but clearly makes her views known on the quality of assessments and annual foster carer reviews. In September 2016, the chairperson expressed concern to senior managers about the ability of the panel to function effectively. This was due to a lack of members and collective expertise and the poor quality of assessment reports. Subsequently, a panel development plan was produced, but progress has been slow. At the time of this inspection, one new independent professional had been recruited to the panel, and two more were in the recruitment process. Training on assessment and report writing for the supervising social worker was booked, but has not yet

been completed. There is currently no one in the role of panel adviser, and access to legal advice is still being negotiated.

Leaders and managers have not taken sufficient steps to ensure that children's and young people's personal information is kept secure. The inspectors identified one case in which personal information was emailed to an incorrect address. In addition, not all foster carers are familiar with the organisation's policy on recording personal information on mobile electronic devices.

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 difference 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 and 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 who 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: SC060967

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Inspectors

Stephen Collett, social care inspector
James Harmon, social care inspector



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