

SWIIS Foster Care Limited

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24 Highfield Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 3DP

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

A large private provider operates this agency. It provides a full range of fostering services.

Inspection dates: 12 to 16 February 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 11 July 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children make good progress overall. Staff and carers identify difficulties promptly and act to resolve them.
- Children are safe. Foster carers understand the risks that children face and liaise well with other professionals to minimise these risks.
- Most matches work well. The vast majority of children experience long-term placements and establish close relationships with their foster carers.
- The agency provides children with an excellent range of opportunities. These promote children's learning and self-confidence.
- The agency supports children in education well.
- The agency meets children's individual needs arising from their cultural and religious backgrounds.
- Senior members of staff have a good understanding of their service and use monitoring tools effectively.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development :

- This inspection has resulted in five recommendations being raised. These represent administrative issues that have a partial bearing on children's experience and progress. In particular, the targets that the agency sets for itself, its staff and for foster carers are sometimes not specific or measurable. Senior members of staff do not escalate shortfalls by local authorities in a timely way.
- Staff do not always follow procedures thoroughly. The views of children are not sufficiently clear in the annual reviews of some foster carers.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 1.7)
In particular, adopt the Foster Carers' Charter in consultation with carers. Also, ensure that all children's views are ascertained in time for foster carers' annual reviews, including those who need additional support.
- Ensure that there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service. (National Minimum Standard 18.2)
In particular, ensure that targets in this and other documents, such as carers' and staffs' supervision records, are specific, measurable, and have clear timescales.
- Ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. (National Minimum Standard 20.4)
- Ensure that the role of the supervising social worker is clear both to the worker and the foster carer. (National Minimum Standard 21.7)
In particular, ensure that the frequency of telephone calls is maintained at the intervals prescribed by the agency.
- Ensure that the registered person takes action to address any issues of concern that they identify or which are raised with them. (National Minimum Standard 25.8)
In particular, escalate concerns about local authorities promptly and effectively.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children progress well overall. The agency supports a large number of foster carers and children and there are inevitable fluctuations in individual children's progress. By the agency's own measures, the vast majority of children make at least steady progress from their starting points and some children's progress is exceptional.

Children receive little information about the agency from their social workers before they arrive, despite the efforts of the agency. Children and foster carers feel frustrated by this. One member of staff is responsible for assessing referrals and applies a thorough knowledge of the households, including foster carers' interests, religions and cultural circumstances. She ensures that placing authorities have all the relevant information about households before children are placed. The matching process is usually effective and foster carers undertake insightful work. For example, foster carers support unaccompanied asylum seeking children. Good matching means that several children who were born in other countries benefit from living with foster carers who speak their own language. With support of their foster carers, children quickly learn to speak English. The majority of placements last over two years, which reflects positively on the agency's arrangements to match and support children. Children often live with their brothers and sisters, which is a significant contribution to their emotional welfare.

The agency arranges an excellent range of children's groups and activities throughout the year. In particular, the support workers organise a Duke of Edinburgh award scheme. This gives children experience of success in a wide range of situations and the vast majority of them have obtained certificates. One child said, 'It was a great experience. It has given me a lot of confidence for the future.' Other children enjoy working with a local theatre group. This includes acting, singing, recording and writing lyrics. One child said, 'I felt anxious and nervous but I got over it and made new friends.' Children are able to join the Children in Care Council and contribute to making improvements in the agency. For example, children have been involved in writing questions for recruitment panels and some children have sat on the interview panel.

All children enjoy a range of new pastimes. This is because foster carers encourage them to participate in sports and other healthy and sociable activities. This increases the child's self-confidence. Like others, one child reported trying several new activities. He said, 'I still go swimming... I received a £10 voucher from [the agency] and was made star of the month for my efforts!' All the children are from nearby local authorities and keep in contact with their families, as appropriate.

All the children have regular opportunities to express their opinions to a variety of adults. Consequently, they feel heard. For example, staff seek out children's views during the annual reviews of foster carers. Children feel accepted by their foster carers and consider themselves part of the households. This contributes to their emotional welfare and security. However, in some case, children's views are not

clearly recorded. This is an administrative shortfall.

Overall, children do well in their education. Most children are in full-time education and children's average school attendance is 96%. This is marked progress for most. Many children show exceptional progress. One child was several years behind but has caught up and will soon take her examinations. Children who are not making enough progress in their learning receive additional support. For example, one child benefited from having an electronic translator at school. When necessary, children from overseas receive extra help to understand British values.

Foster carers ensure that each child's health needs are met. They arrange routine appointments with health professionals as well as providing children with healthy lifestyles. Careful consideration is given to children's emotional health and specialist agencies are engaged. The support workers provide important emotional support to children so that they benefit from the other opportunities on offer.

Children receive a good level of guidance to prepare them for adulthood. Training and direct support from members of staff mean that foster carers understand the importance of preparing children as well as possible. One foster carer said that it was a 'big factor' in the agency. Another foster carer described how her foster child had progressed well in self-care, cooking, budgeting, and using credit and debit cards. There is a steady flow of children moving away from foster carers.

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

The agency works well with all other professionals to keep children safe. Staff maintain a good understanding of the risks faced by each child. This leads to regular reconsideration of the support that children receive. For example, the agency arranges specialist help for children to help them understand the risks of sexual exploitation. Because of this, children have learned to be safer. No child is at risk of radicalisation or extremism. Support workers provide enthusiastic additional help to children on a regular basis. They cover important issues that interest children and help them understand their individual circumstances, such as their relationships and family histories.

A small number of children are at significant risk of going missing from home. The agency actively supports the foster carers so that the children are kept as safe as possible and to decrease the risks. For example, the agency commissioned independent social work support for one couple. This additional advice helped them understand a child's behaviour. Another foster family has helped a young woman remain in placement for four years despite substantial challenges. The foster carers have reduced the risk and given her stability.

Independent agencies speak to children when they have returned from being missing from home. If this does not occur, agency staff challenge the placing authorities, albeit with varying success. Staff speak to children about the reasons for leaving their home. This back-up arrangement ensures that professionals have accurate information about children's motives so they can make them as safe as possible.

Members of staff have a good understanding of the agency's safeguarding procedures. Their communication with other professionals is strong. When children make allegations against their foster carers, staff follow appropriate procedures. Subsequently, individualised plans are compiled to ensure that foster carers' practice is improved, when necessary. One foster carer acknowledged that this had been a painful but valuable learning exercise. Several other foster carers have learned how to avoid using physical interventions. This protects children's dignity and their rights. In extreme cases, the agency takes firm action and de-registers foster carers. The manager takes lessons from incidents and shares his conclusions with the team. This is a source of regular improvement.

Staff help all carers sustain placements well, especially when there are difficulties. They work closely with other professionals. Staff adjust the level of support they provide in accordance with the foster carers' and child's needs. A local authority social worker reported that agency staff 'go overboard' to help children and sustain their placements. A foster carer was very clear that, in the face of substantial challenges, the support from the agency means that she will not give up on the child.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Leadership of the service is strong and reflects the statement of purpose. Ofsted registered the manager in 2012. He has a clear focus on children's progress. In a quickly changing environment, the manager and deputy manager have aligned the service to the falling number of households well. For example, this means adjusting the caseloads of the supervising social workers and amending the timescales of targets in the development plan. Improvements have continued, but at a slower pace. The registered manager is leaving the service imminently. However, an experienced deputy manager is in post.

The service benefits from high-calibre staff in all areas. The supervising social workers provide a good level of continuity and experience. The provision of a team of support workers adds considerable value to the service that children receive. They deal with difficulties, see children regularly, support foster carers and arrange a substantial programme of events.

The manager implements a clear and extensive system of checks on the service. Excellent management tools identify those children who need more support. This process links well to the care planning for individual children, improvements to the service and the development of foster carers. However, there is insufficient attention to timescales. For example, some local authorities have not produced certain documents and information promptly. These delays create difficulties and frustration for foster carers and children. Staff also do not clearly record in foster carers' supervision records the specific steps they expect foster carers to take to address children's needs. This undermines efforts to help children progress as quickly as possible.

Staff undergo regular training to maintain their professional accreditations and to

sustain or upgrade their skills.

Foster carer recruitment processes are centralised now. This is a relatively recent change and is not yet fully effective. Consequently, net recruitment is falling. Senior managers are addressing this. The challenge faced in recruiting new foster carers is the financial inducement from other agencies. The manager and social workers try to prevent this loss of capacity, but as a matter of principle do not provide bespoke financial packages to foster carers.

There is an expectation that supervising social workers ring foster carers at least weekly. However, not all social workers ensure that this call is made. The coordination provided by the Foster Carers' Charter has also lapsed.

Foster carers and prospective foster carers benefit from a substantial training programme. Staff ensure that all foster carers attend sufficient training to complete their development targets within reasonable timescales. The equal and reasonable focus on secondary carers in households is challenging for staff and foster carers. One supervising social worker described it as 'a culture shift'. However, it is an important improvement and a contribution to the progress and safety of children. Supervising social workers supplement foster carers' training in person and at workshops. For example, one social worker helped a foster carer to understand what responsibilities the placing authority had delegated to them. Another foster carer benefited from more information about the risk of child sexual exploitation. This has practical benefits for the children in placement and gives foster carers more confidence in their roles. Although an extensive programme of training is in place for foster carers, it does not routinely address health and hygiene or medicine administration as outlined in the National Minimum Standards. This leaves a potential gap in carers' competencies.

The agency operates an effective panel. The manager acts as the panel adviser. However, this is likely to change in the near future and removes some of the minor conflicts of interest this arrangement causes. The service benefits from a particularly rigorous decision-making process. This serves to quality assure panel processes and meaningfully challenge it. This means that only suitable people become or remain carers.

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 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 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: SC037164

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