

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Limited
6 Addington Place, Ramsgate, Kent CT11 9JG
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd is an independent fostering agency that has been registered since 2005.

At the time of this inspection, the agency has 13 households and 14 children placed. The agency provides long-term or permanent placements, short-term or emergency placements, bridging placements, parent and child, short-break or respite placements and a small number of specialised placements for disabled children or young people. In addition, 'staying put' arrangements are in place for young people to remain with carers beyond their 18th birthday.

There has been no registered manager since November 2018.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 March 2019

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	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 6 March 2015

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 and young people make good progress. They are placed with foster carers who are committed to meeting their everyday needs. As one child said: 'They are always there when you need them. They give me good advice and it keeps me out of trouble.'
- Gathering and acting on the views of the children and young people when appropriate is embedded in agency practice. Children and young people are encouraged to thrive and develop skills for adulthood.
- Therapeutic support provided by the agency is a productive resource that assists with the emotional development of many children and young people.
- The agency's response to children going missing is proactive. Children with missing behaviour benefit from regular management oversight. The agency works hard to ensure that children's episodes of going missing decrease in number.
- Foster carers and children feel very well engaged, respected and involved in the life of the agency. Foster carers report that the agency offers 'outstanding support'. This includes both supervising social workers and office staff.
- Young people, who remain through 'staying put' arrangements or who just keep in touch with their carers and the agency, are valued by all.
- The foster care journey from enquiry to approval is a positive experience for carers, and the process is both timely and efficiently managed.
- The fostering panel provides sufficient oversight, scrutiny and challenge of assessments.
- The quality assurance of the assessment process by the agency is now improved following an example of an incomplete and unsuitable form presented to panel.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The previous manager provided inconsistent and poor management oversight of the agency, which the responsible individual is rectifying.
- A small number of foster carers require training which had not been sufficiently monitored or acknowledged by the management. Also, foster carers require formal supervision of adequate frequency to support the interests of the children placed with them.
- Managers should ensure that there are sufficient staff and good employment practices for all staff.
- A small number of behaviour management techniques need to be more restorative and less punitive.
- Six recommendations are made to encourage further development in the following areas: logging complaints and representations; modernising the children's guide; having a written development plan; foster carers playing an

active role in drawing up the children's placement plans; and a review of the quality and accuracy of records written about the 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
<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 interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that management monitoring identifies which carers have not completed their mandatory training or received their formal support visits and resolves this.</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider may carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and whom they consider may be suitable to become a foster parent ("X"), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>The fostering service provider—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> must obtain the information specified in Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and family, and any other information they consider relevant, must interview at least two persons nominated by X to provide personal references for X, and prepare written reports of the interviews, except where the fostering service provider is a local authority and X lives in the area of that authority, must consult with, and take into account the views of, the local authority in whose area X lives, may, where X was approved as a foster parent by another fostering service provider and that approval has been terminated, and where X consents to the inspection, request inspection of the relevant records compiled by that other fostering service provider in relation to X under regulations 30 and 31. (Regulation 26 (1)(2)(a)(b)(c)(d)) 	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to—</p>	31/07/2019

the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it, and the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 19 (a)(b))	
<p>The fostering service provider must— ensure that all permanent appointments are subject to the satisfactory completion of a period of probation, and provide all employees with a job description outlining their responsibilities.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them— receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal, and are enabled from time to time to obtain further qualifications appropriate to the work they perform. (Regulation 21 (a)(b)(4)(a)(b))</p>	31/07/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that— no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. (Regulation 13 (2)(b))</p>	01/05/2019

Recommendations

- Records are kept of representations and complaints, how they are dealt with, the outcome and any action taken. These records are reviewed regularly so that the service's practice is improved where necessary. (National minimum standards 21.11)
- Where a child requires it, the guide is available, where appropriate, through suitable alternative methods of communication, e.g. Makaton, pictures, tape recording, translation into another language. (National minimum standards 16.6)
- The registered provider has a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service, either identifying any planned changes in the operation or resources of the service, or confirming the continuation of the service's current operation and resource. (National minimum standards 18.2)
- The fostering service supports foster carers to play an active role in agreeing the contents of each child's placement plan, in conjunction with the responsible authority. (National minimum standards 31.1)
In particular, to note the care planning regulations 9 (2) (2) that if it is not reasonably practicable to prepare the placement plan before making the placement, the placement plan must be prepared within five working days of the start of the placement.
- Entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information and are signed and dated. (National minimum standards 26.5)

- Information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. (National minimum standards 26.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The overall progress that children and young people make is noted and celebrated in various ways, including ongoing progress being consistently noted at reviews. Children and young people make progress in a variety of ways. For example, some achieve exceptional academic success for themselves while others learn new ways to communicate previous trauma. One example includes the reviewing officer commenting that the child 'would like to stay with their carer for the foreseeable future, which is a positive move as the child has never been in a position before to think at all about her future'. Children and young people learn to better sustain relationships and develop improved confidence and self-esteem. As one child said, they would give their foster carer '9 out of 10 but it would be 10 out of 10 if I didn't have to eat my vegetables! I've been given a lot of help... and I know nearly everyone in the agency.'

The agency and its foster carers support and encourage children to attend mainstream or alternative educational provisions. All children have personal education plans and education, health and care plans, if required. Any placements under stress and vulnerable to placement disruption due to children awaiting a school placement are offered sessional work. The staff member with responsibility for children's learning has a very good grasp of each child's education status and can cite many good outcomes for several children achieving at school. Education levels that particular children and young people have reached are known and monitored, and they are positively involved with their education providers. All the current children are attending school in line with their peers.

The agency prioritises children's health needs. All the relevant health checks are closely monitored and up to date. Overall, the arrangements for managing medication are good. Children cited many various activities which they enjoy with their carers, including army cadets, swimming lessons, trips to France, gym membership, roller skating, trips to play parks and walking the dog. Activities are offered regularly to children, both from the fostering family and in placement, and are aimed at a range of ages and needs, promoting inclusion.

Carers and children are encouraged to be involved in supporting community and charity events. Children and young people maintain relationships crucial to their identity and culture through the agency contact centre. The agency is proactive in assisting children and young people to spend time with their birth families.

The agency supports a therapeutic approach and offers therapeutic support to all foster carers. Foster carers feel that they are exceptionally well supported by the agency in caring for their children and young people. Additionally, young people who remain through 'staying put' arrangements or just keep in touch with their carers and the agency are valued by all. As one carer stated, 'My child can see that I keep in touch with previous children and that they have got where they want to in life and they see that I can help them achieve their goals as well.'

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

Foster carers endeavour to keep children and young people safe while in their care. Essential documents, such as risk assessments and safe care plans, provide foster carers with reference and guidance. Care plans clearly identify risks and protective factors for individual children and young people. There are clear plans to address them, and these are regularly monitored and reviewed. One carer stated that 'I can reflect on my decisions. When I go to training – it re-establishes the parenting model I use, it reinforces it, it is all relevant and ties in to the model and support from the agency.'

The agency has appropriate policies and procedures in place for when children or young people go missing from their placement, and foster carers are familiar with these. In specific circumstances, foster carers are also able to respond to local authority requests for an individualised response to a child's episode of going missing. This demonstrates appropriate partnership working. The agency can demonstrate a reduction in episodes of going missing for children. This has had a positive impact on placement stability as well as the progress for each child.

Young people who are exposed to or at risk of child sexual exploitation receive good support. Their history is well known to the staff and foster carers prior to placements commencing. Foster carers use their relationship with the young person to enhance the child's safety and have sufficient capacity, skill, experience and awareness to meet children's needs and address any risks of sexual exploitation.

Foster carers do not use physical intervention. Generally, routine behaviour management is a strength in this agency. Foster carers have regularly updated, good training in this area. The training is crucially underpinned by regular supervision from the agency social worker, who discusses any issues in depth. Foster carers know their children and young people well, and as such are adept at managing their behaviour. However, on two occasions the response to a situation was punitive rather than restorative and was seen as unreasonable. These were immediately rectified during the inspection.

Foster care preparation has a clear focus on safeguarding, and this is continued once fosters carers are approved. Unannounced visits, independent reviews and regular opportunities to refresh safeguarding knowledge all help to promote safe and comfortable homes for children and young people.

Recruitment of new employees is good. This helps to ensure that children and young people are cared for by suitable and safe staff, foster carers and panel members. The children who were spoken with during the inspection confirmed that they feel safe in their foster homes and have the confidence to speak to their foster carers about any concerns or worries that they may have.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be

good

The previous registered manager left in October 2018. His management of the agency was inconsistent and missed important operational and regulatory matters, leading to shortfalls in management oversight and scrutiny. This included the supervising social worker holding a high caseload. The systems in place to manage the agency were not sufficient until the responsible individual stepped in. Staff report that they are better supported now that the registered manager has left. A new manager has been appointed but has yet to start working at the agency.

The responsible individual has created a family-orientated service with a real sense of belonging. Foster carers feel supported by their supervising social worker and the agency. Many children find stability and security with their foster carers. The responsible individual is central to the strong vision that underpins the agency's practice and is highly visible to all. For example, she attends foster carers support groups, she undertakes some contact sessions and she completes some direct participation work with children and young people as well.

There is one exceptionally enthusiastic, committed supervising social worker and the responsible individual is actively recruiting for a further full-time social worker. Not all staff had had the training or level of supervision necessary. One such example is the support staff having been given additional responsibilities such as the monitoring of children's health and education as well as out-of-hours support. They have had some positive impact on the monitoring of children's progress but they have not had any training for the additional roles given. Another example includes the lack of escalation when a placement plan was not provided by the local authority during the matching process until it came to the attention of the supervising social worker.

Carers feel supported by the agency and referred to staff being readily available. This results in carers feeling valued. Carers also cited the agency's creative resourcing, including the very appreciated therapeutic support. They say: 'This agency really understand what we are going through;' 'It is all-inclusive;' 'Support is always there, for everything, it doesn't have to be a major thing. We carers also support each other as well;' 'The training here is amazing, no other training comes anywhere close. I feel more confident to deal with their [children and young people's] presenting behaviours and to help them make sense of the situation.' Although carers feel well supported, the management oversight and monitoring of carers' training and supervision have not been adequate. Additionally, training specifically on issues affecting disabled children has not been provided.

The registered individual learns from complaints and immediately resolves any issues. However, not all of these are recorded and managed as complaints. This is a missed opportunity to demonstrate overall that the service's practice is improved where necessary. The agency has an up-to-date statement of purpose to which it holds itself. However, the children's guide is out of date and is not available in alternative methods of communication as required by the children.

Entries in records are inconsistent, with mixed information on all the children in each fostering household combined and are not always signed and dated. Records are not

always easy to read or accessible to children. One example did not distinguish between fact, opinion and third party information and would have been unhelpful to the child now and in the future.

There is an effective fostering panel in place that is well chaired by a knowledgeable and experienced chair. The panel is prepared with appropriate questions based on the assessments. The panel minutes are now timely, accurate and clear. The panel appropriately deferred one assessment which should not have been presented to the panel. Its members hold their duty to safeguard children as their central function.

Over the course of the inspection, the responsible individual was very keen to respond to the concerns raised and began to develop an action plan to address the identified shortfalls within the management oversight.

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: SC062080

Registered provider: Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Limited

Registered provider address: Addington Business Centre, Office 6, Addington Place, Ramsgate, Kent CT11 9JG

Responsible individual: Paula Henderson

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01843 850258

Email address: followingwhispers@tiscali.co.uk

Inspector

Helen Lee, social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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