

SWIIS Foster Care Limited

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SWIIS Foster Care Limited, 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. These include emergency, long-term, medium-term, short-term and parent and child placements. At the time of the inspection, the agency had 146 children in placements and 97 fostering households.

A registered manager is in post.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 11 to 15 October 2021

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 12 February 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The agency is committed to providing opportunities for children to achieve excellent outcomes. The practice throughout the agency is outstanding, and this helps to significantly enhance the quality of children's lives.

Matching processes carefully consider children's needs with foster carers' skills. This means that most children are settled and enjoy long-term permanent care. The number of unplanned placement endings for children is low, and foster carer retention is high. Specialist advisers support foster carers with children's health, education and behavioural needs. This has a positive impact on placement stability and outcomes for children.

Children have positive experiences of living with their fostering families. Some children have lived with their foster families for many years, providing them with stability and a sense of safety and belonging. As a result, children make unquestionable and sustained progress.

Foster carers are committed and enthusiastic about caring for children and are proud of the achievements that children make. Foster carers go above and beyond to provide excellent care to children. One foster family identified that a child they were looking after was significantly behind in their educational achievements. The foster carers acted as good advocates for the child to ensure that they received all the support that they needed. The child is now having appropriate assessments, speech and language support, medical tests to rule out any conditions, and an education, health and care plan is being implemented.

The agency provides effective educational support. For those children who are at risk of being excluded from school, the agency has put in place plans to overcome any difficulties that are contributing to this. As a result, children's exclusions from school are significantly lower than the national average.

Foster carers encourage the children to take part in new experiences. Children access activities suited to their interests and hobbies, such as dance clubs, cadets, and swimming. Children can go on holidays. For some, this is the first time they have left the country and been on a plane. One child was not able to go on a planned holiday with their foster family due to the late return of their passport. When the passport did arrive, the carers booked another holiday to the same destination, so that the child did not feel like they had missed out.

Children get to see and keep in touch with family members and others who are significant to them. The agency, and carers, advocate for children to see their families, and they challenge the local authority if there is a delay in this being arranged.

Supervising social workers take time to get to know the children and offer consistent support to foster carers. The out of hours service is proactive in offering additional support when needed. Foster carers were overwhelmingly positive about their supervising social workers and the excellent support they receive.

The participation workers at the agency are fantastic in their ability to engage children and add value to children's lives. They give children a safe space to share their feelings, they help children build new friendships with peers, and they support their emotional well-being.

The agency promotes inclusion and equality. For example, work has been completed with staff, panel members and foster carers to develop their understanding of racism and discrimination and how children are impacted by this. This was described by staff as having a significant improvement on their understanding of racism. Children have opportunities to develop their understanding of their own and other cultures, for example through the agency's book club, which celebrates diversity via the books children read. The agency has a support group to offer carers, in which they can share their experience of being gay or lesbian in a fostering community and explore if the agency can do more to meet any specific needs.

New foster carers receive good quality of their preparation for the role and the support they receive from the agency. This includes them attending a carers' support group and having a buddy who can offer them guidance and support at different stages of their fostering journey. It is testament to the agency that a significant proportion of new foster carer approvals come from referrals from existing carers.

The agency's response to the COVID-19 restrictions was excellent. The children's participation team kept children engaged with daily virtual activities and competitions, foster carer training moved to webinars online, every foster carer and child was contacted weekly, and an online portal was developed to keep foster carers engaged with the agency.

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

The agency has a strong safeguarding culture. Allegations and complaints are meticulously investigated, with input from the local authority as required. The registered manager is responsive to emerging practice concerns and potential safeguarding issues. She is open and transparent and uses a multi-disciplinary approach when assessing risk. This ensures that everyone has a shared responsibility in decision-making and keeping children safe.

The agency's ability to learn from child safeguarding practice reviews is excellent. For example, after one such review, the agency implemented a plan in which a health adviser will visit all foster carer homes prior to any child under 12 months old moving in. The health advisor reviews equipment and ensures that safe sleeping arrangements are in place.

The use of restraint is very rare. When these do happen, the registered manager is very detailed in her exploration of why the restraint happened and undertakes a standards of care review and brings foster carers' reviews forward when appropriate to do so. This keeps children increasingly safe and creates an expectation of high-quality safe care.

Incidents of children going missing from their foster homes is generally low. Foster carers know who to contact if a child goes missing. On their return they are welcomed back into the family home. The agency and foster carers try to understand the reason for the behaviour to reduce children going missing from home in the future.

Safer care plans and risk assessments highlight known and anticipated risks. Overall, these are reviewed and updated to reflect children's changing needs and circumstances. Foster carers are well equipped to manage self-harmful behaviour and are responsive to ensure that children are safe. Foster carers are given additional support and guidance to understand how to respond to and manage such risks from the agency's health adviser.

The recruitment and assessment processes for carers is effective and safe. Prospective and approved carers receive a range of training opportunities that prepare them for the fostering role. Applicants are invited to attend preapproval training at an early stage. Foster carers' participation in training is very high and has increased during the COVID -19 pandemic due to the agency's ability to adapt.

The agency disseminates learning from practice reviews to all staff through a safeguarding newsletter. This shared approach promotes the high expectations of safeguarding within the agency.

Staff recruitment and vetting practices are thorough, and all required checks are in place. This is to confirm that all staff are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The registered manager is nurturing, approachable and child focused. She strives for continuous improvements and is aware of the strengths and areas for development. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year, morale is high. The members of the staff team are appropriately experienced to undertake the role, with several long-standing staff members.

Staff have huge pride in, and commitment to, working for the agency. One member of staff told the inspectors, 'It's the best job in the world; the agency has children at the heart of everything it does.' The inspectors receive consistent feedback from staff, about the high-quality and consistent support they get from the agency. The registered manager continually considers the welfare of her staff. This is recognised throughout the team.

Staff can manage their workload effectively, due to the teamwork and solution-focused practice. This allows them time to respond to emerging issues and dedicate their time to supporting foster carers and children.

Supervising social workers appropriately and persistently challenge the local authority to update care plans for children and to get the required documents, such as delegated authority and placement plans.

The fostering agency continues to develop strategies that help children to have a say in shaping the service. Children's views, wishes and feelings about the fostering agency are regularly shared. For example, children who are new to the fostering service receive a written letter from another child about their experiences.

The agency has an established panel with diverse membership, including a care experienced person. The panel has met virtually during the pandemic. There is a comprehensive induction programme for new panel members. Panel recruitment is safe, and the agency decision maker's decisions are comprehensive and well evidenced.

All panel members appraisals are up to date. However, the panel chair's appraisal did not consider feedback from the agency decision maker or panel members. This oversight has had no consequences for children.

Inspectors received excellent feedback from local authority social workers and an independent reviewing officer. They praised the communication and excellent recording from foster carers that are regularly shared with them and have informed decision-making. One social worker said she always looked to this agency to place children because she knows children receive a high standard of care.

The agency is working with a charity to develop their care experience panel members and recruit new ones. The registered manager is working with a university to exchange research and practice ideas to inform further development of the agency. This has helped increase the staff's knowledge base in domestic abuse and coercive control.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives.
- The registered person should ensure that the service's decision maker reviews the performance of the panel chair, and for this purpose may attend a proportion of panel meetings but only as an observer. Views about the chair's performance should be sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings, such as prospective foster carers and social workers who present reports to the panel. For all other panel members, the panel chair should conduct the performance review. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: fostering services, paragraph 5.15)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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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