

Apex Fostering Limited

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Brickfield House, High Road, Thornwood, Epping CM16 6TH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency provides a wide range of placements, including parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 14 fostering households and 19 children being cared for by foster carers.

The registered manager post has been vacant since 18 February 2022.

Inspection dates: 25 to 29 April 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	requires improvement to be good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

This newly registered agency approved its first fostering household in September 2021. Foster carers and children's experiences are good. Foster carers feel valued and are wholly complimentary about the support the agency provides. Many children enjoy a sense of stability and belonging in their fostering family. However, practice in the recruitment of foster carers who are transferring from other agencies and management oversight of the quality of paperwork require improvement before this agency can be judged as good. Although matching decisions have improved recently, the quality of matching has not been consistently good enough, resulting in unplanned endings for some children.

Children make good progress in education. Foster carers ensure that children are offered the right education provision. This includes supporting children back into full-time learning and listening to children about what will make them happy at school. With the support of agency staff, foster carers attend education meetings and advocate for the assessments and levels of support that children need. Foster carers have established good communication with children's schools and challenge bullying quickly when it occurs.

Foster carers have good knowledge of children's physical and mental health needs. They ensure that children have access to specialist services when needed. The agency provides foster carers with access to a therapist. This helps carers to remain sensitive to children's experiences and development ages, and to better understand children's behaviour.

Foster carers enable children to explore their identity. They talk openly with children about gender and sexuality and identify professionals and groups that can help meet the child's needs. Children have adults they trust and can talk to about their feelings. One child said that they do not have to say what they are feeling as the carers 'know me better than I know myself'.

Children enjoy spending time with family and friends in the fostering household and in the community. When possible, this is led by the child's wishes. Two foster carers provide supportive home environments in which parents and children can remain together in line with placing authority plans.

Foster carers encourage children to be independent, based on the child's age and ability. For example, children walk to school with friends and administer their own medication when this is the right decision for them. Children are encouraged to chair their own meetings. Opportunities like this help to build children's confidence and self-esteem.

Supervising social workers help plan careful introductions for children moving in with foster carers. However, matching reports completed by agency staff lack information

about the needs of all children in the household and are not always signed by a manager. As a result, foster carers' capacity and support needs are not fully identified and planned for at the point of matching.

Foster carers' records provide a good overview of a child's experiences. The agency places an emphasis on records being easy to read and accessible to children.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Eleven foster carers have transferred to the agency from other independent fostering agencies. Transfer assessments are of variable quality and some lack important information about an applicant's suitability to foster. One transfer progressed even though the applicant was subject to a standards of care investigation. As a result, the fostering panel was required to make a recommendation while the investigation was ongoing. The fostering panel questioned this but did not provide strong enough challenge. Consequently, the scrutiny of fostering panel and the additional safeguarding measure it is there to provide are not always effective.

Managers have implemented a safer recruitment policy for staff and panel members. However, the reasons why applicants left previous roles working with children or vulnerable adults are not verified. Managers do not always ensure that gaps in employment are fully accounted for. This increases the risk of unsuitable people working for the agency.

There have been few safeguarding incidents. Overall, foster carers have acted quickly to keep children safe when these have occurred. Supervising social workers challenge foster carers when they do not respond as expected. When necessary, this includes working with the local authority designated officer to undertake investigations.

Risk assessments identify the needs of individual children. However, these are not always up to date and do not therefore reflect current practice in the fostering household. Safer caring household plans are basic and miss out some important guidance on the supervision of children, providing personal care and implementing safe care in holiday accommodation. This could place children at increased risk of harm and foster carers at increased risk of allegations.

Foster carers access a range of training to meet children's individual needs. Children can also complete some of these training modules. This enables foster carers and children to learn together about keeping safe. In one example, this prompted meaningful conversations about online abuse and the child's internet use.

Foster carers complete training in self-harming behaviour. They ensure that children can use alternative ways of expressing themselves when they feel distressed. As a result, there has been a reduction in self-harming incidents.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

In the short time that the agency has been operational, the registered manager has moved to another position within the agency. This is because they felt unable to dedicate the required time to the registered manager role. The reduction in management capacity has affected the quality of management oversight of paperwork and matching decisions. This includes foster carers not being provided with local authority placement plans or signed delegated authority and inaccuracies in foster carer agreements. Management oversight of the recruitment of staff and implementation of good practice on the transfer of foster carers need improving.

A new manager has been appointed but is yet to start at the service. The acting manager is maintaining effective overview of cases and knows the children and foster carers well. However, they are not receiving professional supervision to help them with these new responsibilities.

Leaders understand the agency's strengths and priorities for improvement. They have established an aspirational development plan and are making good progress with it. Managers responded to shortfalls quickly during the inspection.

Managers model a child-centred culture in which foster carers and children get the help that they need without delay. They ensure that children enjoy a range of experiences, planned by the agency or supported by their foster carers. Foster carers feel that their diversity is valued. Managers are implementing research by one of their supervising social workers in relation to matching and meeting the needs of black and ethnic minority children.

Foster carers report high levels of support from the agency, including to their birth children during difficult times. This includes access to out-of-hours support, support groups, mentors and regular events at which foster carers can strengthen their support networks. Foster carers said that managers are well versed in the children's and foster carers' needs. Foster carers' comments included, 'It's a pleasure to work with such committed people,' and 'Children and young people are the focus of everything.'

Supervising social workers provide foster carers with regular, good-quality supervision. This helps foster carers to think about what children are communicating through their behaviour in the context of past trauma. Supervision provides reflective discussions and appropriate challenge when foster carers' practice falls below the agency's standards.

Fostering panel is not yet providing effective quality assurance of assessments and practice. Minutes of fostering panel meetings do not always provide an accurate record of discussions. The agency decision-maker is suitably experienced and qualified. However, their involvement in the agency is limited and falls short of what is required.

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—</p> <p>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 risk assessments for children are updated when needed and that safer caring household plans provide guidance for foster carers based on children's needs and the risks to be managed on a day-to-day basis.</p>	6 June 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must not—</p> <p>employ a person to work for the purposes of the fostering service unless that person is fit to do so.</p> <p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform,</p> <p>and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (1)(a) (3)(c))</p> <p>In particular, provide a written explanation of any gaps in employment and, when a person has previously worked in a position where duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, verify so far as reasonably practicable the reason why the employment or position ended.</p>	6 June 2022
<p>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p>	4 July 2022

<p>to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent,</p> <p>where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given,</p> <p>to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent, and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate—</p> <p>In considering what recommendation to make under paragraph (1), the fostering panel—</p> <p>may request the fostering service provider to obtain any other relevant information or to provide such other assistance as the fostering panel considers necessary. (Regulation 25 (1)(a)(b)(c) (2)(b))</p> <p>In particular, fostering panel should provide effective challenge when more information is required to inform a recommendation about an applicant's suitability.</p>	
<p>Where a person ("X") applies to become a foster parent and the fostering service provider decide to assess X's suitability to become a foster parent, any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation.</p> <p>(Where the fostering service provider have obtained all the information set out in paragraph (1A) and have not given the notification in paragraph (1B) within 10 working days of doing so, the fostering service provider must, subject to paragraph (3)—</p> <p>obtain the information specified in Part 2 of Schedule 3 relating to X and other members of X's household and any other information they consider relevant. (Regulation 26 (1) (2)(a))</p> <p>In particular, assessments of foster carers transferring to the agency must contain full information about the applicant to help inform fostering panel's recommendation of suitability and terms of approval.</p>	<p>4 July 2022</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 30, paragraph 14.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs. In particular, matching risk assessments should consider the needs of all children in the household. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 32, paragraph 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 48, paragraph 23.12)
- The registered person should ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of the agency's registered person. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 49, paragraph 24.3)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 50, paragraph 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that each foster carer is given a copy of the child's placement plan as soon as this is provided to them by the responsible authority. If provision of the care plan is delayed, the fostering service should follow this up with the responsible authority. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 60, paragraph 31.2)

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: 2635545

Registered provider: Apex Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Brickfield House, High Road, Thornwood, Epping, Essex CM16 6TH

Responsible individual: Sali Walker-Borthwick

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 03330 440339

Email address: info@apexfostering.uk

Inspector

Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
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