

Sure Start Fostering Agency

Sure Start Fostering Agency Limited

Sir Robert Peel House, Suite 101, 344-348 High Road, Ilford IG1 1QP

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Sure Start Fostering Agency is an independent agency that provides a full range of fostering services, including emergency, respite, short-term, long-term and parent and child placements.

The agency and the manager registered with Ofsted on 19 January 2021. This was the agency's first inspection.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 10 approved foster families and was providing placements for 14 children.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

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

All six children spoken with during the inspection talked highly about their experiences of being in this agency's foster care. However, there are some significant areas of the fostering practices that require improvement to be good as they undermine the overall quality of care and the effectiveness of the agency.

The agency's matching process is weak. The agency does not consider the foster carer's experience and skills when putting them forward to the placing authorities as suitable to care for a particular child. This means that any unmet needs are not identified and no action is taken to address the gap. For example, one child who takes medication for a diagnosed mental health disorder was placed with a foster carer who has not had relevant training about these matters.

The agency's practice in relation to dealing with children's medication is another area identified that requires improvement. Staff do not monitor foster carers' management of this significant aspect of children's healthcare. Medication administration records for one child were found to contain many errors. No explanation for the six-days' gap in the medication records was available. The same foster carer recorded that they had continued to administer medication to a child for four days after the child had been moved to a different placement. This did not happen and it was not identified by the agency as erroneous, four months afterwards.

Leaders and managers work in partnership with professionals to ensure that children receive the best possible care and support. One child said about the foster carer, 'She fights my corner.' However, on one occasion, the agency failed to challenge the placing authority when it was clearly debatable if some elements of the child's healthcare plan were in the best interests of the child.

Promoting stability in children's lives is another area for improvement for the agency. Out of 27 placements that ended, six children, or more than 22%, had unplanned endings.

Currently placed children enjoy stability in their lives. They have developed positive relationships with their foster families. One child said about their foster carer, 'She is understanding, compassionate and helpful.' Another child described their foster carer as, 'caring, patient and playful'. One parent said that the foster carer was 'soft, fun and fair'.

The agency is ambitious for children and supportive of their education. This results in children's improved engagement with their learning and education. One child who has been selectively mute/silent in education for 10 years now talks when at school.

All six children spoken to said that they were happy. All of them spontaneously talked about how much better their lives have been since living with their foster families. Children are developing confidence, self-esteem and friendships. They are looking positively to their futures.

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

The quality of the agency's safeguarding practices is variable. Some areas require improvement to be good. The weaknesses in how the agency helps foster carers to protect children and promote their welfare mean that children are not always safeguarded in the best possible ways.

The agency's safeguarding policies do not provide comprehensive guidance to staff and foster carers on all aspects of safeguarding. An example of this is the lack of written guidance about how babies and young children in parent and child placements are to be safeguarded. This gap has resulted in insufficient records, although the outcome for the current parent and child placement is positive.

The agency does not have guidance on safeguarding children from peer-on-peer abuse. It does not always consider the potential safeguarding impact of children on each other. For example, when matching children with foster families or when assessing risks this is not always considered.

The agency's learning from safeguarding incidents is not effective. One child made an allegation against another child when the foster carer left the children unsupervised. The incident was considered within the multi-professional framework but did not trigger a review of the agency's own safeguarding policies and practices. The awareness of peer-on-peer abuse and sexual harassment between children remained limited even after the incident.

The agency's management of risks does not always follow good practice guidance. Safer caring guidelines for foster families, risk assessments and safety plans for individual children are not always completed. When these documents are completed, they do not always take into account all known risks to the child. Additionally, the agency does not carefully consider risks to younger children.

Children's safety plans are not shared with the foster carers or children. In addition, the records of supervising social workers' visits do not always demonstrate that known concerns have been discussed with foster carers.

Staff recruitment is another area for improvement for the agency. The provider does not check that all staff members' employment histories are complete. The reasons for ending previous employment which included working with children or vulnerable adults are not always scrutinised. The agency obtains other required recruitment information.

Despite the weaknesses in help and protection, all children said that they felt safe and there are signs that they are safer. For example, some children with a history of going missing from care have not gone missing from their current placements.

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

The registered manager is a qualified social worker and is working towards obtaining a suitable qualification in leadership and management.

Despite starting this fostering agency during the pandemic, leaders and managers have gone some way to fulfil the agency's statement of purpose and provide a fostering service that makes a difference to the lives of children. The children, foster carers, agency staff and all professionals spoken to during the inspection had only positive things to say about this agency.

Some elements of the agency's fostering practices are strong. The processes for recruitment, assessment and approval of suitable foster carers are effective. The registered manager ensures that the quality of the assessments of prospective foster carers is high.

The agency's panel is constituted properly and is completely independent from the agency. The panel makes sound recommendations after careful scrutiny of the information presented to them. The panel is child-focused and the chair said that they felt answerable to children who are looked after.

The agency's decision-maker (ADM) brings an independent perspective to the agency. The ADM contributes her expertise to the agency's decisions and provides effective supervision to the registered manager.

Leaders and managers have developed a positive working environment for staff. Staff receive regular supervision and have other opportunities to reflect on and develop their practice.

Foster carers talked highly about the support provided to them. They commented about the agency's child-centred culture and genuine interest in helping children to overcome any discrimination and barriers to their progress. Some other professionals also talked about the registered manager's ambition for children and passion for social justice. How leaders and managers promote equality, diversity and inclusion is another clear strength of the agency.

While the registered manager knows children well, the monitoring of the service as a whole is insufficient. Quarterly monitoring reports and the annual review of care have not been completed. Leaders and managers had not been aware of some of the weaknesses until they were identified at this inspection.

The practices are not evidence-based. The records are often repetitive, lacking professional insight and the voice of the child. Although children reported being

listened to, their voice is not evidenced in the agency's records and processes. This applies in particular to observations of younger children, whose voice is under-represented. Continuing with virtual visits without valid reason has undermined the quality of the supervising social workers visits to foster families.

Leaders and managers quickly resolved some of the minor administrative weaknesses which were identified during the inspection. This shows their commitment to working with the regulator and their capacity for continued improvement and development of this new service.

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, and</p> <p>before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's—</p> <p>wishes and feelings (having regard to the child's age and understanding). (Regulation 11(a)(b)(i))</p> <p>Specifically, the registered person must ensure that robust risk assessments and safety plans are completed and implemented and that foster carers and children are involved as much as possible.</p>	1 June 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p> <p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The written policy must include a statement of measures to be taken to safeguard any child before making parent and child arrangements with that foster parent. (Regulation 12 (1)(a)(b) (2))</p> <p>Specifically, the registered person must expand the safeguarding policies to include peer-on-peer abuse and safeguarding children in parent and child placements, and implement these policies in practice.</p>	1 June 2022

<p>The fostering service provider must promote the health and development of children placed with foster parents.</p> <p>In particular the fostering service provider must ensure that each child—</p> <p>has access to such medical, dental, nursing, psychological and psychiatric advice, treatment and other services as the child may require,</p> <p>is provided with such individual support, aids and equipment which the child may require as a result of any particular health needs or disability the child may have. (Regulation 15 (1) (2)(a)(b))</p> <p>Specifically, the registered person must ensure that the arrangements for dealing with children’s medication are robust and children receive their medication as prescribed.</p>	<p>1 June 2022</p>
<p>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless</p> <p>full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (3) Schedule 1.4 and 1.6)</p> <p>Specifically, the registered person must ensure that the agency has all required staff information, including the full employment history. Where a person has previously worked in a position where duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults they should verify, so far as reasonably practicable, the reason why the employment or position ended.</p>	<p>1 June 2022</p>
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</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.</p>	<p>1 July 2022</p>

<p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))</p>	
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Recommendation

- The registered person should improve the matching process so that it maximises the likelihood of stability of placements. This is particularly in relation to identifying any gaps in foster carers' skills and ensuring that they receive the training and support required. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)

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: 2615940

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Inspector

Seka Graovac, Social Care Inspector

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