

SWIIS Foster Care Limited

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Severn House, Mandale Park, Belmont Industrial Estate, Durham DH1 1TH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

SWIIS Foster Care Limited is a large independent fostering agency based in County Durham. It provides foster care placements used by several placing authorities. A range of placements are provided, including short-term, long-term, emergency and respite, as well as placements for sibling groups, parent and child, and disabled children. The agency is responsible for the recruitment, training and support of foster carers.

At the time of the inspection, the agency had 66 fostering households and 78 children and young people placed with its families. Five young people were accommodated under 'staying put' arrangements. These are arrangements that enable young people over the age of 18 years to remain living with their foster carers.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2018.

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: 9 to 13 May 2022

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: 14 May 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children are welcomed into foster families. They receive a welcome pack from the agency and are provided with a copy of the 'Your family book' during the matching process. This document helps children develop an understanding of who the foster family is, and their interests. This helps children to prepare emotionally and physically for their unfamiliar environment.

The agency ensures good matching of children to foster families, which enables children to build trusting and secure relationships with their foster carers. Many children are long-term matched with their foster carers and for some children stability is enhanced as they remain with the foster families under staying put arrangements. However, this discussion is not always recorded and agreed early in the child's care planning process. This has the potential to cause children unnecessary distress at a later stage.

Children's overall health, physical, emotional and specialist needs are actively promoted with the support from dedicated and professional foster carers and universal services. Many children have complex health needs and require highly skilled medical oversight from a range of external specialist services. These services are supported well from the support and advice that they receive from the agency's health adviser. Foster carers receive training that enables them to meet the specific health needs of the children so that they can administer medication appropriately. However, this is infrequent to the level of need for some children and could lead to inconsistency.

Children are supported in every aspect of their education. Where children are excelling, they are encouraged and supported to achieve by their foster carers and all achievements are celebrated. Children who struggle are supported by the agency education worker, alongside the foster carer and other members of the care team around the child. They collectively advocate and challenge local authority educational leads and schools. This continuous support helps children back into formal education. Interim measures, which include alternative educational provisions, helps to ensure that the children have structure and purpose to their day. This helps children to feel valued and safe.

Children access a range of activities and opportunities within the agency. Children can have a say in the type of activity that is organised and they look forward to events. An example of this was children looking forward to quizzes during the COVID-19 pandemic and receiving prizes from the service. One child talked about trips to Blackpool, Flamingo Land and outdoor activity centres as well as staff from the agency delivering presents for children's birthdays. A child said: 'It has been a pleasure to be with [Agency]; the staff have been great and all the carers are great.'

Children are supported to engage in the development of the agency. Children asked for first-aid training, after watching a potentially tragic event during a live

professional football match on television. Additionally, children took part in a 'safety online' training event. Their contribution was so powerful that it had a striking impact on staff. A member of staff stated: 'We were blown away by their [children's] knowledge.' The agency has shared feedback with the central training team to enhance the support to children. This helps children to gain confidence, knowledge and a sense of pride.

Foster carers' household safe care plans are inconsistent. While these plans record that children will be supported and encouraged to lock the bathroom door, this was not possible in one household as the bathroom door did not have a lock. This does not support children's right to privacy.

The agency supports new foster carers well, and they receive good communication from the initial point of their enquiry. Foster carers receive a professional service, and the assessment process is clear and undertaken to a good standard. Foster carers are positive about the allocation of a 'buddy', who provide informal advice and guidance. A new foster carer commented on the assessment process and said: 'It has been thorough and in-depth, but I did like that. They looked into everything and anything.' This supports the capacity of foster carers to be able to meet the needs of children.

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

Children receive good help and protection. This begins at the point of referral and then through the matching process. Children's risks are identified and recorded in individual risk assessments, safety plans and personalised household safe care plans. This consistent identification and evaluation of risk ensures that there are clear strategies for foster carers to follow to reduce the risks. They, with the support of the care team, support the children to become increasingly safe as a result.

The agency holds weekly staff meetings on a Monday morning. These are central to the functioning of the service. They focus on the needs of the children and allow staff to collectively monitor and track key issues children and foster carers face and to celebrate success. Staff take immediate action to address any concerns when these are identified in the meetings. This process helps the agency to be proactive in protecting children from harm.

Foster carers take appropriate action to safeguard children when they go missing from home. Foster carers follow agreed agency and local authority missing-from-care protocols. An effective coordinated response, which includes speaking to an independent adult on return, reduces the risk of harm to children. However, during an investigation into related behaviours of a child, the agency failed to fully follow up on a child being subjected to an unnecessarily prolonged period of labour exploitation. This does not support children to understand meaningful employment and to identify the risk of financial exploitation.

Monthly visits by the agency supervising social workers and weekly welfare calls provide foster carers with support, guidance and direction. The child is seen alone

during these visits, which is an added safeguard, alongside unannounced visits and support offered virtually from the behaviour management team. During the pandemic lockdowns, electronic equipment was used creatively to ensure that the children were seen regularly. As restrictions lifted, the visits to foster carers' homes took a gradual approach, involving, for example, seeing children from the window, in the garden and through social distancing in the community. These measures reinforced safe care of children.

The agency has a portal designed for panel members and independent assessors and has a dedicated section for each. They have access to the agency's policies and procedures and direct access to the agency's six-monthly safeguarding newsletter. These discuss different themes, such as harmful sexual behaviours or recent case reviews. The newsletters are accessible and provide excellent summaries for panel members, staff and foster carers. This demonstrates an interest in developing the service, and striving for better and safer outcomes for children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is confident and proactive in ensuring that the children remain at the centre of good practice. She shows her commitment to driving standards forward by being responsive to continuous service development. The staff share her vision and tenacity for improving the outcomes for children through ensuring that the care provided by foster carers is the best it can be.

External professionals are positive about the care provided to children and the excellent working relationships that they have with a range of professionals in the agency. This was replicated in the care provided by foster carers. A social worker spoke about the foster carers' strong attachment to the children, the excellent care they provide and being consistent in their advocacy to ensure that the children's needs are met.

The manager has good oversight of the agency's operation. The numerous monitoring and audit systems in place enable children's progress to be tracked and intervention to be proactive. For example, the supervising social worker uses the children's individual outcome tracker to monitor the children's progress in all aspects of their development. This is reviewed and evaluated by the manager and forms part of the management team's supervision and support to staff and foster carers.

The leadership and management team ensures that staff supervision takes place regularly and that high-quality records from these sessions are maintained. A member of staff said:

'The management team are visible, approachable and proactive in ensuring that you have everything you require to succeed in your role and will offer different opportunities to grow and develop your practice.'

An experienced professional chairs the fostering panel. The minutes reflect the quality assurance process to a high standard. The panel is diverse and its members represent a broad spectrum of society. This, along with the skills and experience of

the panel members, demonstrates a strong panel. Children are actively involved in providing questions for potential foster carers. This combination enables the decision-maker to make well-informed decisions. This ensures that the children are cared for by suitable adults.

The registered manager ensures that serious incidents are managed well by the agency. However, several notifiable incidents have not been sent to Ofsted in a timely manner. This inconsistent practice does not enable Ofsted to monitor action taken and respond accordingly when required.

Foster carers receive effective support in respect of the specific and complex needs of the children. However, supervision provided by the supervising social workers does not consistently review and evaluate the safe care and administration of medicines provided by foster carers to children. The recording does not evidence the foster carers' dedicated role in ensuring that the complex needs of children are met. This limits the agency's ability to fully evaluate the care provided for 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
If any of the events listed in column (1) of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1))	29 June 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the foster carers respect the child's privacy and confidentiality, in a way that is consistent with good parenting. This is in reference to enabling a child to lock the bathroom door to maintain their dignity and privacy. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.5)
- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. Children are protected from abuse and other forms of significant harm (e.g., sexual or labour exploitation). This is in particular reference to financial exploitation of children through employment, ensuring that all steps are taken to stop this practice through appropriate channels. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication. This is with reference to children with complex health needs to ensure that foster carers' understanding and knowledge are regularly reviewed and updated. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 6.10)
- The registered person should ensure the fostering service has a policy and practical arrangements which enable children to remain with their foster carers(s) into legal adulthood, for example so that he or she may develop appropriate life skills before being required to move to more independent accommodation. Any such decisions are agreed with foster carers at a placement meeting and are detailed in a child's placement plan. This is to ensure that children are aware of plans for their future as soon as is possible. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 12.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service supports their foster carers to ensure that they provide foster children with care that reasonably meets those children's needs, takes the children's wishes and feelings into

account, actively promotes individual care, and supports the often complex health needs of children. This is to ensure that there is a stand-alone recording that replicates the safe care and administration of medicines provided by foster carers to children. (Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.1)

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: SC036081

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Inspectors

Michael Dack, Social Care Inspector
Lewis Roberts, Social Care Inspector

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