

Synergy Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC043377
Inspection date	22/02/2013
Inspector	David Putnam
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	The Leathermarket, 11-13 Weston Street, London, England, SE1 3ER
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Telephone number

Email

Registered person

Registered manager

Responsible individual

Date of last inspection

Synergy Fostering Limited

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11/07/2008

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Synergy Fostering Limited is privately owned. The agency currently supports 31 fostering households, providing up to 57 placements for children and young people. At the time of this inspection 37 placements were filled. This number includes a small number of young parents who are placed in foster homes along with their young children. In addition to mother and baby placements, the service seeks to provide emergency, respite, short- and long-term foster care placements for children and young people of all ages across Greater London and surrounding counties. The agency ensures that sibling groups are placed together whenever possible.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

Enthusiastic and committed staff effectively support sensitive and passionate foster carers who are focused on meeting the needs of children and young people. Children and young people experience continuity, stability and consistency following periods of disruption in their lives. Key strengths of this agency include the high proportion of children and young people placed with their siblings and the length of placements. Both these features contrast favourably when compared to other independent fostering agencies.

Children and young people speak extremely positively about the care they receive. They clearly state that they feel safe with their carers and would be confident about expressing any concerns if they had any. Monitoring is of a high standard and identifies that individuals make genuine progress in all aspects of their lives. Progress is recognised and celebrated. The views of children and young people actively inform planning processes for their individual care.

The safety of children and young people is enhanced through the careful preparation, assessment and development of foster carers. Foster carers are made to feel part of the team caring for children and young people. Carers say that they feel valued by leaders and managers who they describe as open and accessible. A range

of carers from diverse cultures, religions and backgrounds provide options to secure effective matches. Consideration regarding the suitability of placements carefully addresses the individual needs of children and young people and the skills and experience of foster carers. Robust matching practice and clear procedures lead to a limited number of unplanned endings.

Supervising social workers provide high quality supervision reflected in clear and accurate recording. Individual strengths and areas for development of carers are further highlighted through an annual review process undertaken by an independent social worker.

Leaders and managers model high aspirations for children and young people and actively seek to improve the quality of service. This results in outstanding outcomes for children and young people.

Shortfalls identified have limited direct impact upon children and young people. Action is required to ensure that all panel meetings are quorate. Despite taking appropriate action to safeguard children and young people, significant events are not consistently notified to Ofsted. Not all assessments of foster carers are prepared and signed by a registered social worker. The minutes of panel meetings do not always clearly record why decisions are made. Vetting checks for staff employed in the past are not stored in a way that can be readily accessed. Appraisals of the Registered Manager and fostering panel members are not currently completed.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
24 (2011)	ensure that no business is conducted by a fostering panel unless at least one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post qualifying experience is present (Regulation 24(1)(ii))	31/05/2013
36 (2011)	ensure that 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))	31/05/2013

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that written reports on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer (NMS 13.7)
- ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for those working (including as volunteers) for the fostering service which includes all matters listed in this standard (NMS 19.3)
- ensure that all staff, including the Registered Manager, have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, where they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for (NMS 24.6)
- ensure each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, Fostering Services paragraph 5.15)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Children and young people are extremely positive about their foster placements. They say that, 'It feels like it's my home.' Others say, 'I'm really happy. I want to stay with [my foster carer] forever; I don't want to move.' Children and young people describing their first ever foster placement simply say, 'It's just really nice.' Others who have been in a number of placements previously state, 'There's such a big difference. The second you walk in, you feel welcome.'

Children and young people see themselves as part of the family where they are placed. As such they are involved with making day-to-day decisions as a member of a family group. This helps children and young people to develop a sense of belonging and inclusion in family life, significantly boosting their confidence and self-esteem.

Children and young people are supported and encouraged to play a full and active role in making plans and decisions that affect them. Supervising social workers ensure that the views of children and young people are sought prior to formal review meetings. Detailed reports are produced and presented at meetings to review the care of children and young people. Independent reviewing officers describe these reports as very helpful.

Children and young people recognise the progress they make and attribute this to

the care they receive. For example, young people say that their health has directly improved as a result of being placed with their carers. They put on weight when they are unhealthy and feel better about themselves. Young people say that they are encouraged to take responsibility for arranging personal appointments to promote their own physical health.

Children and young people experience continuity in their education when placed with this agency. They only experience a change in school if this is necessary to promote their safety and well-being. Where a change is required, foster carers and supervising social workers advocate for children and young people to attend the most appropriate education provision. Attendance at school is monitored and tracked by the agency. School reports indicate that only authorised absences are recorded and that overall attendance is above 90%. This supports children and young people to achieve to the best of their ability. Records maintained by the agency demonstrate that children and young people make genuine progress against National Curriculum targets during their placements.

Children and young people benefit from the continuity and consistency of being placed with their siblings when possible. Currently 44% of all placements in the agency are with siblings. Children and young people also benefit from living in stable placements. Currently 64% of all children and young people have been placed for more than one year. Furthermore, 33% of all children and young people placed have lived with the same carer for more than two years. The average length of placement for this group of children and young people is more than five years.

Through the success and stability of placements, foster carers evidence that they are able to meet the wide ranging needs of children and young people. Children and young people build their confidence and sense of identity through developing new and appropriate friendships within their community. Contact with family and others who are important to them is promoted when it is appropriate to do so. The cultural and religious identities of children and young people are actively supported and encouraged through sensitive matching and proactive engagement by carers. For example, children and young people benefit from celebrating religious festivals and travelling with their foster carers to countries where their ancestors lived.

Foster carers aspire to provide continuing care for young people who reach the age of 18 years. Young people are supported to develop the skills to prepare them for adulthood. Young people obtain part-time employment while pursuing their education. This provides personal income and valuable work experience. Young people aspire to attend university like others previously placed with the agency.

Children and young people engage in a wide range of activities. This enables them to develop individual skills, pursue interests and contribute to the wider community, for example, through involvement in uniformed organisations. Children and young people do not offend in ways that lead to involvement with the criminal justice system.

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

Children and young people benefit from being looked after by foster carers, who are carefully recruited, assessed, regularly supervised and trained. As a consequence, carers are equipped to provide a good level of care, enabling them to meet the varied and often challenging needs of a wide range of children and young people. Independent reviewing officers from placing authorities say that the agency and carers are focused on the needs of the young people. The longevity of foster placements and the evidence of progress children and young people make is a testament to the robust matching processes undertaken by the agency. Local authority commissioners confirm that matching of needs to the skills of foster carers is good. They highlight that this results in limited breakdowns of placements.

Foster carers say that they feel extremely well supported by the agency at all times. Supervising social workers build strong and effective relationships with carers. This helps to highlight strengths as well as areas for development. Targets are set and followed up effectively. Extensive training is provided through an on-going programme. However, carers highlight that additional opportunities for development are utilised when necessary. For example, more experienced carers enhance the confidence of newly approved carers by mentoring them. Consequently, individual needs of children and young people are met in a way that ensures stability and continuity. Furthermore, when external specialised training is identified, carers say they are supported to access this to improve their personal development.

Focused and innovative marketing results in the recruitment of a broad range of carers who come from very diverse cultural, ethnic backgrounds. A wide variety of life experiences adds to the ways in which carers are able to meet the different needs of children and young people. Enquiries are promptly and effectively followed up by fostering support workers to ensure that prospective carers feel engaged.

Children and young people are regularly consulted and involved in the development of the service. This helps children and young people understand that their wishes and feelings are sought and respected. For example, the views of birth children and those placed with foster carers are obtained and contribute to annual reviews of foster carers. Young people also contribute to preparation courses for prospective carers. Feedback from applicants demonstrates that this is highly valued.

Foster carers say that they build a comfortable relationship with staff who undertake their assessments. They describe the assessment process as, 'quietly intrusive', but emphasise that they are prepared well and know what to expect in advance. Assessments of carers are completed to a high standard within the recommended timescales. This minimises delays and ensures that well-prepared carers are available to meet children's needs. However, this inspection highlighted one example when an assessment was not undertaken by a qualified and registered social worker. Although the Registered Manager contributed to and oversaw this assessment, her own social work registration has lapsed. A recommendation is made to ensure that in future all reports are prepared and signed by someone registered to use the protected title of

social worker.

The panel functions well. The panel is chaired by an extremely experienced person who brings an extensive depth of knowledge to the approval process. The agency has recruited additional people to the central list of panel members from a range of different backgrounds. These representatives use their professional and life experiences to make sound and balanced judgements. This ensures that the agency has a range of carers available to meet the needs of different children and young people. However, on one occasion the panel did not include an independent and suitably registered social worker. An independently commissioned reviewing officer undertakes all annual reviews of carers. This provides an impartial perspective which highlights carers' strengths and identifies plans for improvement during the year ahead. Recommendations are made to the agency decision maker immediately following panel meetings. Decisions are made and communicated to carers within stipulated timescales. This ensures that carers are kept informed and helps to reduce the time that children and young people have to wait for appropriate placements.

The agency further utilises the skills of the panel by seeking recommendations to improve the overall quality of the service. For example, at the suggestion of the panel, meetings are now held regularly and scheduled throughout the year. This prompts completion of assessments within appropriate timescales and reduces delays between annual reviews being completed, and subsequently considered by the panel. Minutes of panel meetings invariably contain a good level of detail that highlights contributions from members and appropriate exploration of key issues. However, occasionally these minutes lack clarity relating to the reasons for the panel's recommendations. The agency has begun the process of undertaking appraisals of panel members by seeking their feedback and self-evaluation. However, this process has not yet been completed. This means that the opportunity to identify particular strengths and areas for development of particular members has not been taken.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

Children and young people clearly say they feel safe within their placements. One young person said that this was the first time they had felt safe. However, there have been some limited examples when young people have experienced difficulties in the wider community, such as being threatened, attacked and robbed of their personal possessions. When such events take place foster carers consistently take robust action. This ensures that any physical and emotional health needs are addressed and promotes the safety of children and young people after the event. One young person said that their foster carer, 'made me feel safe. I knew I had a safe home where I lived and I knew things were being sorted.' Notifications of these incidents when the police are called are not consistently notified to Ofsted. As a result it is not possible for the regulatory body to fully monitor the service. However, it is recognised that the direct impact upon children and young people is minimised by the proactive response of foster carers supported by the agency.

Clearly written processes and procedures clarify expectations of carers when managing difficult situations. This ensures that the safety and welfare of children and young people is promoted at all times. Incidences of children and young people going missing are extremely rare when compared with similar fostering services nationally. Foster carers are confident about action they would take if this were to happen. Bullying is not highlighted as a problem by children and young people, but a policy stipulates a robust response if this should arise. No formal complaints have been received from children and young people in recent years. However, the agency recognises that there may still be issues that children and young people are unhappy about. Children and young people are able to identify a newly appointed 'children's champion'. This person has been appointed to ensure all children and young people have a conduit to raise any concern with the aim of it being resolved swiftly and effectively. Young people can also access an independent advocacy service provided by their placing authorities which provides them with further support if necessary.

The preparation of foster carers is appropriately focused on safeguarding and safe caring. The knowledge foster carers develop is augmented through an on-going training programme which is updated regularly. This ensures that carers have a good understanding of current child care practice. Foster carers are made aware of the impact abuse and neglect can have on a child's behaviour and development.

Unannounced visits to foster carers' homes take place at least annually. This ensures that the standards expected by the agency are maintained. Each of the three directors also undertakes a minimum of one visit to every carer each year. This helps to develop an open and transparent culture. Carers say that they feel the senior management of the organisation are accessible to them. They express confidence in approaching them about any concern or suggestions for improvement. Supervising social workers regularly spend time with children and young people and consistently seek their views on the placement. This provides the opportunity for them to express any problems or difficulties.

Allegations against foster carers are dealt with promptly, effectively and fairly. The agency demonstrates sound knowledge and practice regarding safeguarding children and young people. Appropriate liaison with external agencies is maintained in a way that ensures the safety of children and young people while providing appropriate support to foster carers.

Practices regarding the selection and vetting of staff, students, apprentices and panel members helps to protect children and young people from being harmed by inappropriate applicants. However, historic records of vetting checks are not consistently stored in ways that are easily accessible. The impact of this shortfall upon children and young people is limited.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **good**.

The leadership and management team is made up of three directors. All have direct involvement in the agency on a daily basis. The Registered Manager and the responsible individual have built up extensive experience in social care over a number of years. The third director brings skills and expertise from a long career in manufacturing and industry. This results in a positive amalgamation of social work knowledge and understanding alongside corporate business experience and acumen. Effective systems are developed to monitor the service continually. Consequently, progress of children and young people is tracked and necessary actions leading to improvements are identified and followed up.

A significant recent development has been the introduction of a computerised information system. This fundamentally changes the way in which all records are made and stored. Individual information regarding children, young people, carers and staff is stored securely in one place. Rigorous systems are in place, which ensure that personal data is kept safe and secure. Documents relating to children and young people are linked in a logical and clear way that helps to provide a distinct account of their individual placements.

Commissioning local authorities highlight that communication from leaders and managers is prompt and effective. Independent reviewing officers from placing authorities add that foster carers appear to be well supported and there is good communication from supervising social workers within the agency. This helps to identify progress and inform care planning for individual children and young people. Links with other professional agencies further improve the care of children and young people.

The agency hosts events for everyone living within each foster home. In addition to providing an enjoyable social activity together, leaders and managers seek to obtain the views of everyone who attends. Views are collated and used to review the service and identify plans for the future. Consequently, children, young people and other stakeholders are able to influence the quality of the service provided.

All staff receive regular and effective supervision and training which helps them in their personal and professional development. Comprehensive induction programmes are provided for new staff which assists them to fully understand their new roles. Progress is reviewed throughout their probationary period. Appraisals are undertaken for staff annually and focus on improvement of staff performance. However, the performance of the Registered Manager is not currently appraised and documented formally. As a result they do not benefit from clear targets being set to improve their personal performance or that of the service.

Despite this minor shortfall, a clear culture and agenda for improvement exists within this agency. The leadership and management team strive to identify areas for development and demonstrate a continual commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people. Directors consistently evaluate the service against national minimum standards and regulations. Inspection reports from other agencies are regularly reviewed with the aim of delivering an outstanding service in the future. Three recommendations were made at the last inspection. All of these have

been fully addressed, which has resulted in a positive improvement in the service for children and young people.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.