

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Investaco House, Unit 14, Invicta Way, Manston Park, Ramsgate CT12 5FD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency provides long-term or permanent placements, short-term or emergency placements, bridging placements, parent and child, short break or respite placements and a small number of specialised placements for disabled children or young people. In addition, 'staying put' arrangements are in place for young people to remain with carers into adulthood. At the time of this inspection, the agency had 13 households, with 15 children placed.

There has been no registered manager since May 2023.

Inspection dates: 1 to 5 July 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 19 June 2023

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children make good progress. This is because they have trusting relationships with their foster carers. Foster carers provide care specific to the needs of the children that they care for. They show commitment to children and work with a range of professionals to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. Children say that they are happy with their foster carers. One child said, 'There is nothing that I don't like living with them [carers].' Another child said, 'I'm happy here and I feel safe.'

Children feel valued and part of the agency. Staff provide daycare and other support when children are not in school or when foster carers need a break. Because of this, one child has made significant progress with their behaviour and social relationships. Another child continues to make progress with their social and emotional well-being. Staff and foster carers work well together to ensure that children have positive experiences. This creates memories for everyone to reflect on.

Foster carers receive good-quality training that helps to prepare them to care for children and to ensure that children make progress in all areas of their lives. There is a strong commitment to children's education. One foster carer works with a college to ensure that their child accesses their lessons. The carer also attends the child's personal education plan reviews. Another carer advocates strongly for a school place for a child who has been without education for several months. Staff offer learning opportunities for children at the agency's office. This is to supplement the education for children in alternative education provisions. Staff make the process fun for children. Consequently, children make progress in their educational outcomes.

Children receive effective therapeutic input through the agency. Foster carers receive therapeutic parenting training to support their care for children. This also helps to support the relationship between therapist and carer, ensuring the best possible outcomes for children. Foster carers are positive about this training and feel confident in its application.

Foster carers keep good-quality records. They detail children's day-to-day routines and experiences. They also show their achievements and detail more challenging days. However, staff do not provide these records regularly to responsible authorities and they are not reviewed in a timely manner. This is a missed opportunity for the agency to highlight the progress and experiences of children.

Children have good opportunities to share their views and wishes. Staff consult with children at least monthly. Staff listen to children and make changes to improve their experiences. The agency involved children in the interview process for the current fostering manager. The manager says this was a positive experience, with good questions asked. This helped children to feel part of the agency and that their views are valued.

Good plans are in place for children who live a long distance from their home local authority. Carers show an awareness of the need to maintain family ties. They work with the agency to ensure that children see their families in a planned and safe way. When children do not have time with immediate family, the agency works with the placing authority to identify links with extended family members. This helps children to feel that their views and needs are important and that time with family is understood.

The agency helps carers to prepare children for moving on. Carers support children to develop their confidence and to prepare for their future. One child is preparing for independence and was positive about this experience.

The fostering panel works well. They use an effective process to ensure that they make well-balanced recommendations. This ensures the agency has the right foster carers to meet the needs of children. Applicants now receive a welcome pack with a range of information about panel and the agency. The agency decision-maker (ADM) is now part of the senior leadership team. A process is in place for the fostering panel to receive the ADM's decisions, including any actions needed. Panel minutes are of good quality, as are fostering assessments and carer household reviews.

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

Carers know how to identify and respond to children's risks. Staff work with carers to help and support children who display risky behaviours, including those involved in substance misuse. The agency works with carers and children in this. They involve children in activities that help their understanding of the dangers of substance misuse. Additionally, staff and carers work with children on keeping safe online.

Detailed safer care plans are in place. They show how a child can be safely cared for within the family. Staff review and update the plans to ensure that they remain appropriate and meet the needs of the child and family.

Carers receive good-quality training that prepares them for when a child may go missing from home. One carer has worked well with the agency in relation to a child who has gone missing from home. High-quality training also prepares carers for working with children at risk of child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and county lines. Additionally, staff have carried out work with carers around self-harm. Because of this training, children receive care from foster carers who are well prepared to meet their needs.

The agency prepares carers to manage challenging situations. They know how to work with behaviours that put children and others at risk of harm. Carers receive de-escalation training. This provides them with the knowledge and skills to support children. Carers are confident in providing clear and consistent boundaries. Because of this, children are responsive. One child has made significant improvements in their behaviour because of the patience and resilience of their carer.

Clear safeguarding arrangements are in place. The arrangements support the welfare of children. There is good multi-agency working to achieve the best possible outcomes for children.

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

The agency has not had a registered manager since May 2023. The agency has now appointed a new manager who has made a positive impact. However, this manager is due to leave the agency imminently. While leaders and managers are dedicated to the children and what they can achieve, the inconsistencies in management arrangements and sufficiency of qualified staff are evident.

Leaders and managers do not consistently oversee the work of social work assistants and student social workers. This is a missed opportunity for input into their continued learning and development.

Staff are positive about their induction and the supervision that they receive. They feel supported. However, staff do not receive appraisals of their practice. This is a further missed opportunity to have input into their learning and professional growth and development. Training for staff is of a good standard and meets the specific needs of children. For example, staff have received training around diabetes.

Safer recruitment processes are variable. For instance, gaps in the employment record of one new member of staff were not explored. This means that leaders and managers did not satisfy themselves that this member of staff was safe to work with children.

Although there is a wide range of training on offer to foster carers, leaders and managers have not ensured that all carers have accessed required training. For instance, some foster carers have not completed safeguarding or online safety training. The foster carers who have accessed the training on offer are positive about the quality of what is provided.

Leaders and managers prioritise the needs of children. For example, they work with responsible authorities to find suitable education facilities for children not in school. Leaders and managers have a good understanding of the progress that children make. External professionals are positive about working with the agency.

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, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The registered provider must appoint an individual to manage the fostering agency. (Regulation 6 (1)) In particular, ensure that a manager who is suitably qualified and experienced is appointed and that they submit an application to register.	1 September 2024
The fostering service provider must ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably qualified, competent and experienced persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, having regard to— the size of the fostering service, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by it, and the need to safeguard and promote the health and welfare of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 19 (a)(b)) In particular, ensure that there is a sufficient number of qualified staff to provide support and supervision to foster parents.	1 September 2024
The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them — receive appropriate training, supervision and appraisal. (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	1 September 2024

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that effective recruitment practices are followed. This particularly relates to ensuring that gaps in employment are

explored with any applicant. ('Fostering services: national minimal standards', 19.2).

- The registered person should ensure that support and training are made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers. This relates to ensuring that all foster carers attend required training and that their portfolios remain up to date. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)
- The registered person should ensure that unqualified staff and volunteers who carry out social work functions do so under the direct supervision of experienced social workers who are accountable for their work. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.7)
- The registered person should ensure that information about individual children is sent to responsible authorities within agreed timescales. This relates to foster carers' written records and logs about children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.4)

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: SC062080

Registered provider: Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Limited

Registered provider address: Unit 14, Invicta Way, Manston Park, Ramsgate
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Responsible individual: Paula Henderson

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01843 850258

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Inspector

Vevene Muhammad, Social Care Inspector

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