

Apple Fostering Services

Apple Fostering Limited

42–44 Clarendon Road, Watford WD17 1JJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Apple Fostering Limited is a small independent fostering agency based in Watford, Hertfordshire. The agency currently provides support to 11 children and young people, predominantly in the north London area. The agency currently has eight foster households.

The suitably qualified and experienced manager was registered with Ofsted for this agency in October 2018.

Inspection dates: 18 to 22 February 2019

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

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: 22 May 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: requires improvement to be good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because:

- Agency records are not consistently maintained to a high standard and do not always reflect the actions taken by carers and staff to promote children's welfare.
- On one occasion, the agency did not provide appropriate emotional support to a child in crisis.
- The children are not given information in a format appropriate to their age and understanding about the foster carer and the foster household before arrival.
- The manager did not notify Ofsted of two significant incidents as required.
- Foster carers' personal development plans are not sufficiently detailed. Foster carers who care for children who are considered at risk of self-harm have not had training in self-harm awareness and management.
- Not all carers have received an unannounced home visit in the past year.
- The only first annual review of a carer's suitability, which has taken place, has not been presented to panel.
- Panel member and staff vetting practices are not consistently sufficiently robust.
- New panel members are not always provided with an opportunity to observe a fostering panel meeting.
- The agency's whistle-blowing policy and safeguarding policies do not address how any allegations will be managed when agency staff are related to each other.
- Staff supervision and appraisal systems are not implemented effectively for all staff.

The independent fostering agency's strengths:

- The children enjoy living in stable nurturing homes.
- Due to the help and support that they receive individually, most of the children make strong progress.
- The children develop long-term supportive and meaningful relationships with their foster carers.
- The children feel safe, loved and valued. They know that their carers believe in them and will support them and advocate for them.
- The agency works well in partnership with the children, parents and other agencies to promote positive outcomes for the children.
- The foster carers feel well supported, respected and valued.

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
For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person— is of integrity and good character; has the qualifications, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform; is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform; 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(3)(a)(b)(c))	31/03/2019
If a fostering service provider decides to approve X as a foster parent they must— give X notice in writing specifying any terms on which the approval is given; and enter into a written agreement with X covering the matters specified in Schedule 5 (the 'foster care agreement'). (Regulation 27(5)(a)(b)) In particular, ensure that the foster care agreement accurately states the terms of approval and is signed and dated by all relevant parties.	31/03/2019
The fostering service provider must review the approval of each foster parent in accordance with this regulation. A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. The fostering service provider must on the occasion of the	31/03/2019

first review under this regulation, and may on any subsequent review, refer their report to the fostering panel for consideration. (Regulation 28(1)(2)(5))	
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))	31/03/2019

Recommendations

- Foster carers actively safeguard and promote the welfare of foster children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.2)

In particular, ensure each child receives the practical and emotional support they need in times of crisis.

- Written records kept by the fostering service when a child goes missing detail action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return, any reasons given by the child for running away from the foster home and any action taken in the light of those reasons. This information is shared with the responsible authority and, where appropriate, the child's parents. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 5.10)

- Unless an emergency placement makes it impossible, children are given information about the foster carer before arrival, and any information (including when appropriate, photographic information) that they need or reasonably request about the placement, in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. Whenever possible, children are able to visit the foster carer's home and to talk with the foster carers in private prior to a placement decision being made. Children can bring their favourite possessions into the foster carer's home. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 11.3)

- There is a whistle-blowing policy that is made known to all staff, volunteers, foster carers and panel members. This makes it a clear duty for such people to report to an appropriate authority any circumstances within the fostering service which they consider likely to significantly harm the safety, rights or welfare of any child placed by the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.6)

In particular, ensure the whistleblowing policy is reviewed and updated.

- Foster carers' personal development plans set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.5)

- Support and training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

In particular, provide self-harm awareness training to carers who care for children

who are considered at risk of self-harm.

- Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 21.8)
- Persons joining the central list of persons considered suitable to be fostering panel members are provided with an opportunity to observe a fostering panel meeting. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.8)
- All staff have their performance individually and formally appraised at least annually and, when they are working with children, this appraisal takes into account any views of children the service is providing for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 24.6)
- Ensure that staff, volunteers, panel members and fostering households understand the nature of records maintained and follow the service's policy for the keeping and retention of files, managing confidential information and access to files (including files removed from the premises). There is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.2)

Inspection judgements

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

When possible, placements are planned, and the children can visit their carers before they move in. However, the children are not currently given introductory information about the carers before they meet them. This means that potential opportunities to reduce children's anxiety are missed.

Most children make positive progress from their individual starting points. The children are healthy and well. They grow in confidence and maturity and demonstrate improved resilience and self-esteem. Two children rated living with their carers as '10 out of 10' and said, 'There are no negatives. We fit in well. It's all really good.' Despite the sensitive support of their carers, some children, on occasion, continue to self-harm. On one occasion, a child who had harmed themselves did not receive the practical and emotional support they needed.

The agency staff ensure that the children are suitably matched with their carers. As a result, the agency has relatively high levels of placement stability. The children live in secure and caring homes in which they receive support that meets their individual needs. The children develop close relationships with their foster family, and refer to their carers as 'uncle' and 'foster brother'. The foster families are there to guide the children in times of trouble. A child said, 'It felt like they actually believed in me! They [the foster carers] praised me when I turned it around. They said, "I'm so proud of you".'

The children have fun. They participate in activities that they enjoy, such as playing football, spending time with friends and going to the cinema. Some children have enjoyed the opportunity to travel abroad and explore aspects of their cultural heritage.

Some young people choose to remain living with their carers after their 18th birthday. Some other young people continue to keep in touch with their carers. One young person often pops round for Sunday lunch. This young person's social worker said, 'There is a deep affection between them. She [the young person] knows that [the carer] is always there for her.' This ongoing support helps young people's transition into adult life.

Young parents are well supported to develop their skills and knowledge of their child's needs. Consequently, they demonstrate improved parenting capacity. A young parent said, '[The foster carer] is always there when I need her. She helps whenever I ask. It's like having a fairy godmother. She is very loving and caring. She has a heart of gold.'

This small agency has been successful in recruiting carers from minority backgrounds. This has facilitated wider opportunities to match children with carers of similar heritage. New carers are welcomed, prepared and assessed effectively to help them begin to undertake the fostering role.

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

improvement to be good

The agency's safeguarding and whistle-blowing policies were written some time ago, prior to staffing changes at the agency. These policies do not identify how the agency will ensure suitable independent investigation of any allegations, should they be made, regarding people who work for the agency and are related to agency directors.

The carers act appropriately when children fail to return home at an agreed time or go missing. However, information held by the agency does not consistently provide sufficient detail or clarity about the incidents. For example, details of the time that the child was last seen, actions taken by the carer and when the child returned are not clearly documented. This means that opportunities to understand patterns and trends and aspects of risk are potentially missed.

Vetting procedures for panel members and fostering agency staff are not consistently robust. Two written references were not held on one panel member's recruitment file. Neither of the recruitment files viewed contain evidence that the applicant's references have been verified. There has been no direct access to children by either of the people whose files were reviewed. However, these shortfalls fail to demonstrate a consistently robust approach to recruitment. Consequently, the ability of the manager to scrutinise an applicant's fitness effectively is limited because information that has the potential to have a bearing on suitability may not be identified.

Children have good relationships with their foster families. They can talk to their carers about things that worry them. The foster carers balance children's safety with children's age-appropriate need for personal freedom. Most children make progress in relation to their personal safety and risk-taking behaviour. Incidents of offending behaviour, self-harm and going missing reduce for most children during the time that they live with their carers. A social worker said, 'The carer and others couldn't do any more than they are doing. Everybody is trying to do as much as they can to keep her safe.'

The agency provides carers with suitable training in the wider safeguarding context, including understanding gang affiliation and preventing and responding to child sexual exploitation and radicalisation. The carers understand their responsibilities to keep the children safe and act on any concerns. The agency raises any safeguarding concerns with partner professionals. Agency staff challenge other professionals to act, to ensure that safeguarding matters are managed effectively.

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

The current manager has been registered since October 2018. Prior to this, the agency was without a registered manager for two and a half years. Although the organisation tried to limit the impact of this with temporary management arrangements, it has had a significant effect. Consequently, the oversight of the agency has not been sufficiently robust. The current registered manager understands the strengths of the agency and the areas for development. She has a clear vision for the service and has begun to drive improvement. She has taken suitable action to address most of the requirements that were made at the last

inspection. There is positive progress in many areas. However, areas for improvement, some of which remain from the last inspection, have been identified at this inspection.

Panel arrangements have improved since the last inspection. A suitable agency decision-maker is in place. The new diverse panel membership enables the panel to draw from a range of professional knowledge and life experiences. However, many panel members are new and not all have had the opportunity to observe a functioning panel before becoming active members.

The very small staff team feels valued and well supported by the manager. However, formal systems such as appraisal and team meetings are not in place. Administrative staff do not receive formal supervision. There is a lack of cohesion in respect of record storage and retrieval systems.

The carers, children and parents are consistently extremely positive about the support that they receive from the fostering agency. Carers said that the support that they receive from the agency is brilliant. A carer said, 'The agency social worker is always there. If I ring her in the middle of the night, regardless of the time, she will always answer the phone.' Agency social workers know each of the children well. Foster carers' monthly supervision visits are documented effectively and show the progress that most children are making.

The agency social worker has established positive partnerships with other agencies and strongly advocates for the children. One placing authority worker said that the agency social worker had been 'really banging on doors' when a placing authority failed to deliver the quality of support that the child needed. Another professional said, 'The agency has been very responsive. It's been lovely.'

Administrative systems have improved since the last inspection. It is now rare for carers to go outside of timeframes for annual reviews and unannounced visits. However, the agency is still not fully compliant with the regulations and national minimum standards in this area. One carer, who was not actively fostering, did not receive an annual review within the past 12 months or an unannounced visit in the previous 22 months. Furthermore, the review of the only carer who was due a first annual review was not presented to the panel. The reviewing system of the ongoing quality and parenting capacity of carers is not consistently effective.

Staff and carers generally maintain records of suitable quality. However, there is no effectively implemented strategy for maintaining and storing records. Information is stored in either of two electronic systems, on the agency social worker's computer, or as hard copy. Consequently, it is difficult to quickly locate required information. There is a lack of attention to detail. Important documents such as delegated authority and foster carer agreements are sometimes undated, unsigned or contain inaccurate information. Information held does not consistently sufficiently demonstrate the actions that carers and staff take to ensure that children are well safeguarded and good outcomes consistently promoted.

The manager did not notify Ofsted of two significant incidents as required. However, these incidents have been managed appropriately and ensured that meeting the child's needs remains paramount. Ofsted has not been able to monitor the quality of the agency's response to ensure that the children are well safeguarded.

The training provided to carers is relevant and covers most core areas of need. However, foster carers' personal development plans do not set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their development needs and experience. Some carers have provided care and support to children who are considered at risk of self-harm, but the agency has yet to identify and deliver training to carers in this area.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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

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