

Apple Fostering Services

6th Floor First Central 200, 2 Lakeside Drive, Park Royal, Harlesden, London NW10 7FQ

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

This is a small independent fostering agency based in north-west London. The agency currently provides support to 17 children and young people, predominantly in the north London area. The agency currently has 10 foster care households.

Visit dates: 18 to 19 November 2020

Previous inspection date: 18 February 2019

Previous inspection judgement: Requires improvement to be good

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

Children and young people have trusted and secure relationships with their foster families. Foster carers are genuinely interested in the welfare of children and young people placed in their care. External care professionals speak positively about the quality of care that children and young people receive. One social worker said that a child in placement asked them to tell the court, 'If I can't live with my mum or my sister, I must stay with my foster carer.'

Children and young people make steady progress and their experiences are positive. Throughout the pandemic they have been helped to maintain good contact with family and friends when it is safe for them to do so.

Children and young people are encouraged to develop practical living skills and are supported by their carers into adulthood. Some young people have opted to remain living with their foster carers in staying put arrangements past their 18th birthdays. Another young person who did move out into his own accommodation after his 18th birthday chose to move to a property very close to his foster carer to ensure that he could continue to get advice and support from the family.

Children's and young people's views are well understood and considered. However, the service's two children's guides require review as some of the language is not user-friendly.

Children and young people know the supervising staff of the fostering agency well and meet with them in private when they visit. This gives children and young people good opportunities to share their views and opinions about their placement and any wider issues they may have. The fostering service also seeks the views of children and young people through a children's questionnaire.

Children and young people are helped to live healthy lifestyles. Their social, physical and mental health needs are well understood and promoted. For example, children receive age-appropriate information and resources about COVID-19 to lessen any concerns they may have. Children have access to specialist health services as required; these include children and young people's mental health services, an enuresis clinic and substance misuse services.

Children's and young people's educational needs are well met, and this helps them to do well in school or college. One child described how he has been able to focus more intently on his education during COVID-19 restrictions. His foster carers have devoted significant time to helping him with his school work, which has resulted in a marked improvement in his school attendance and attainment. The fostering service

bought books and other learning materials for foster carers to use with children and young people during times of lockdown.

The safety of children

Children and young people are protected from harm and abuse. Foster carers and staff work hard to keep children and young people safe. There have been very few instances of children going missing from care. When this does occur, staff and foster carers take effective action.

Risk assessments identify children's and young people's known risks. Foster carers follow safe care policies that provide them with strategies to keep children and young people safe. For example, a foster carer spent time with hospital staff in preparation to care for a baby who had been born with illegal drugs in their system. This was to promote the baby's safe care once they were discharged to live with the foster carer.

Foster carers provide children and young people with clear and consistent messages about boundaries and expectations regarding their behaviour. Children and young people who historically presented with challenging behaviours are now better able to manage their emotions. This has led to reduced instances of challenging behaviour. One social worker said, 'The foster carer has done exceptional work with [name of child]. She knows my young person and she's an incredible key part of keeping everything together. He's complex, but she has a view of my child, which is important.'

Foster carers receive good training in safeguarding and child protection. Some of this training, including the self-harm workshop, covers specific high-risk issues. However, some foster carers reported that they feel that there is a need for training that has an increased therapeutic approach to care. This is to enhance their existing skills in meeting the needs of children living with trauma.

The fostering service has received very few complaints or allegations against foster carers. Where this has occurred, managers deal with these effectively and appropriately. This promotes children's safe care.

Leaders and managers

The leadership and management of the fostering service are strong. This plays a key part in ensuring that children and young people live in stable placements, are kept safe and make steady progress.

Leaders and managers place the well-being of individual children at the centre of their practice. A good illustration of this is managers' negotiation and approval of the placement of a child following the direct request of a parent.

Plans for children are effective, which helps to ensure that their needs are met. Children are well matched with their foster carers, feel settled and have good

experiences. In one case, the foster carer is collecting pertinent information and keepsake items for a baby identified for adoption. The foster carer is committed to helping to complete life-story work for the baby as they move to a permanent placement.

The fostering service is managed by an experienced and qualified registered manager. Despite this, the registered manager is yet to complete and forward to Ofsted a monitoring report which outlines the quality of care and development of the fostering service.

Since the service's last Ofsted inspection in 2019, there has been no significant increase to the number of approved foster carers from diverse backgrounds. This means that the service is currently unable to meet the diverse needs of future placements for children.

Leaders and managers share close and effective working partnerships with other agencies. This helps to ensure that children's and young people's care is well coordinated and that all those involved are aware of the pace of progress and any issues. One social worker identified the strengths of the service as being good communication, good support for the children and young people, and staff being accessible for meetings.

The members of the staff team work well together. This assists children and young people to benefit from placements that are consistent and stable. The fostering panel is well organised and effective, and promotes safe, secure and stable placements for children.

Leaders and managers provide foster carers and the staff team with a wide range of relevant training opportunities. There is a focus on safe care training. Some staff indicated that they would like additional training opportunities to further enhance their professional development.

Staff, managers and foster carers receive excellent support and supervision. One foster carer said, 'The best thing about the agency? We know the team, and we work well and professionally together. We're all reading from the same hymn book and that's good for children.' Another foster carer said, 'They [staff] are very much there for you. No need to make an appointment. Even at 12 midnight they'll take your call. There's good communication at all times for advice.'

This visit has not explored the fostering service's efforts to resolve all shortfalls identified at the last full inspection. Therefore, requirement 20 is repeated in this report.

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))	1 February 2021
The registered person must maintain a system for— monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency. 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. 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))	1 February 2021

Recommendations

- 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). Ensure that 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)
- Ensure that the fostering service implements an effective strategy to make sure that there are sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. Planning for future demands should cover the need for short breaks for disabled children. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 13.1)
- The children's guide must include a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children, how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, the children's rights director, Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate. Specifically, ensure that the guide is written in a way that children and young people can easily understand. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 16.4)
- Ensure that support and training are 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. In particular, provide foster carers with training that has a focus on therapeutic care. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 20.8)
- Ensure that the employer is fair and competent, with sound employment practices and good support for all its staff and volunteers. In particular, experienced staff should receive training to enhance their professional development. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 24.1)

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC451751

Registered provider: Apple Fostering Limited

Responsible individual: Stephen Liddicott

Registered manager: Cecilia Hitchen

Inspector

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, Social Care Inspector

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