

Apple Fostering Services

Apple Fostering Ltd

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

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Apple Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in West London. The service aims to provide short and long-term care placements, bridging placements, respite care, emergency care and sibling placements. The service provides foster care for disabled children and several parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had 11 approved fostering households with 16 children in placement.

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

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 September 2021

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	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 18 February 2019

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 receive individualised care that ensures that their needs are well met. They thrive in stable, nurturing foster care placements, have good experiences and make steady progress from their starting points.

Children and their foster carers share positive, loving relationships. A child said, 'My carer gives you all the support you need. When I leave, I will be visiting all of the time. She will be my nana.'

Children's wishes and feelings have an influence on the care they receive. They make day-to-day decisions about their lives and are encouraged to make choices. In one case, the approval status of the foster carer was amended to allow her to care for a child who had insisted that they should not be cared for by anyone else other than this foster carer.

Children benefit from careful placement planning. Introductions between children and their prospective foster carers are sensitively co-ordinated, at the child's pace. The fostering service's matching process is effective, and placements provide children with security and a sense of belonging.

Children are supported to live healthily. This has been the case prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster carers and staff monitor children's health and ensure that their health needs are well met. All children are promptly registered with primary health care services. As required, children and young people have access to specialist services such as child and adolescent mental health services and antenatal services.

Children's learning outcomes are good. Children attend school or college very regularly and are making good progress. Foster carers are strong advocates for their children's educational success and are very much involved in promoting this ethos. Foster carers and staff celebrate children's academic and general achievements. This acts as further motivation for children to aim high. During the COVID-19 restrictions, children's learning continued, largely uninterrupted.

Children engage in a wide range of physical and social activities that are of their choosing. Typically, these include sport, attendance at local youth clubs and outdoor activities. They enjoy family events and holidays with their foster families. Children's participation in play and leisure activities is enhanced by the work of the service's support workers. The agency's mentoring programme provides children with opportunities to develop confidence and self-esteem. Children work closely with carefully selected mentors who are positive role models to them.

Older children are well prepared for their transition to adulthood. They benefit from the input of their foster carers and the fostering staff who help to prepare them to manage their lives more independently. One young adult moved to live in his foster carer's neighbourhood, so that he could continue to receive their guidance and support.

Children enjoy meeting with their parents, siblings, other family members and friends when it is safe for them to do so. Staff and foster carers manage these arrangements carefully and there is a strong focus on the impact and best interests of children.

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

The fostering service considers effective safeguarding as a priority for all placements and holds this ethos central to its entire function and operation. Foster carers are committed to developing positive relationships with children and the agency operates a culture of openness and trust.

Allegations and complaints against foster carers are rare. Subsequent internal investigations are thorough. There is a need for foster carers to receive training focused on working in partnership with other professionals. This is because this has been a theme in some of the complaint issues raised.

Staff ensure that they consistently review and monitor each child's safety and well-being throughout their placements. Children benefit from the agency's clear and robust child protection policies and procedures. This helps to keep children safe. However, the service is yet to develop and implement adult protection procedures essential for parent and child placements.

Staff ensure that placement plans address any changing needs and that strategies are in place to help reduce risk-taking behaviour. For example, staff complete risk assessments soon after placements start. These are updated regularly and help to identify known and potential risks to children's safety. Foster carers devise safe care plans. However, both risk assessments and safe care plans are not always sufficiently detailed or explicit about what safe care strategies are to be used with individual children. This is to help keep children safe.

The assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers have a strong focus on child protection, and this supports their safe care of vulnerable children. Unannounced home visits are another mechanism that monitors the safety of children.

Staff and foster carers work hard to promote positive behaviour. Foster carers make good use of praise and incentives to help them to manage children's behaviour. These strategies are largely effective. Foster carers are skilled in setting firm boundaries and clear structure to children's lives. This helps with children's understanding about appropriate conduct. Instances of children's challenging behaviour are rare.

There have been no incidents or risks associated with children misusing drugs or alcohol, offending, being involved in child criminal exploitation, or being sexually exploited. Strategies are in place that help to reduce the risk of children's self-harming behaviour or going missing from care. A child told the inspector, 'I feel safe. There's no violence here.'

Foster carers receive bespoke, targeted training to support them to manage children's risk-taking behaviour. Training has recently included the impact of children accessing pornography and the dangers posed by gambling. Foster carers support

children to understand the risks presented to them by internet use and how to keep themselves safe while accessing social media.

Staff recruitment and vetting practices require some improvement. Managers are unable to show evidence of staff's proof of identity and evidence of formal qualifications. This is to confirm that all staff are suitable to work with vulnerable children.

Foster carers' homes are safe and secure. Staff conduct checks that ensure that homes are well maintained and comfortable, and that there are no health and safety concerns.

The fostering service has strong and effective working partnerships with other agencies such as children's social workers, school personnel and health professionals. These collaborations are successful and promote a well-coordinated approach to safeguarding children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The leadership and management of the fostering agency are strong. The management team demonstrates a continued commitment to provide and maintain quality foster care placements that meet the needs of children well. The registered manager has the appropriate experience, qualifications and skills to manage the fostering service. The fostering service is well run.

Leaders and managers have high aspirations for children and an ambitious vision for the development of the service. This has been interrupted due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the agency's plans to host social activities for groups of children. In addition, the service has not been successful in increasing its pool of approved foster carers. This is to ensure that the service offers placements that meet the diverse needs of children.

Monitoring systems are robust, and this offers insight into the quality of the service. Monitoring reports offer action plans that help to improve the service. Most of the shortfalls identified at previous inspections have been resolved. However, managers must ensure that Ofsted is notified of key events, and that this information is forwarded in a timely manner. The fostering service is a fair and competent employer. Staff support and training and development opportunities are good.

The fostering service's preparation of foster carers is thorough. This ensures that prospective and approved foster carers have good insight into the needs of children and have appropriate knowledge and skills. Foster carers complete identified core and specialist training and have personal development plans.

Leaders and managers provide foster carers and staff with excellent support and supervision. A foster carer said, 'If you need help, it's always at the end of a line, the response is always brilliant. It makes life easier and takes a huge burden off of you.' Foster carers overwhelmingly identify the level of support that they receive as a clear

strength of the service. The service's foster carers' annual review process is thorough. This ensures that foster carers remain suitable to care for vulnerable children.

The service's fostering panel operates effectively and efficiently. Panel members have expertise in key and relevant fields that relate to children's development. The administration of the fostering panel is effective and panel meeting minutes are appropriately detailed. The fostering panel undertakes clear and appropriate analysis of the work presented at panel meetings. This promotes safe and stable foster care placements.

The quality of foster carer assessments is generally very good. However, the quality assurance of some foster carer assessment requires improvement as not all are of a high standard. Largely, assessments are detailed, analytical, and highlight how applicants have demonstrated their suitability to be approved as foster carers.

Children benefit from the close partnership working between their foster carers, fostering service staff and other professionals. Communication is regular and effective. This is particularly true with local authority social workers and education and health professionals. This supports the effective coordination of children's care.

An independent reviewing officer said, 'The social worker is extremely positive about the placement and the foster carer's skills. Her view is that no other placement would have been able to maintain (the child) for this period of time.' This illustrates the commitment and skills of foster carers and staff to provide the best possible care to 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
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support, including support outside office hours, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17 (1)) This relates to the development and training of foster carers in adult protection policies for parent and child placements, and partnership working with other professionals.	1 January 2022
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 December 2021
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))	1 December 2021

Recommendations

- The registered provider should ensure that both risk assessments and safe care plans sufficiently detail the safe care strategies that are to be used with individual children in order to keep children safe. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 26.2)

- The registered provider should ensure that they implement an effective strategy so that they have sufficient foster carers to be responsive to current and predicted future demands on the service. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 13.1)
- The registered provider should ensure that foster carer assessments are consistently completed to a high standard. ('Fostering services: National minimum standards', 25.3)

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: SC451751

Registered provider: Apple Fostering Ltd

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Responsible individual: Stephen Liddicott

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Inspector

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, Social Care Regulatory Inspector

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