

Apple Fostering Services

Registered provider: Apple Fostering Ltd

Full inspection

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. It carries out the recruitment, assessments, training and approval of foster carers and provides ongoing support to foster carers. The agency provides placement opportunities for children looked after by local authorities.

Inspection dates: 22 to 26 May 2017

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: 24 October 2016

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because

- Despite some significant progress, there remain shortfalls relating to the leadership and management of the service.
- The interim manager has continued to act as the supervising social worker for some of the foster carers, which has had an impact on her capacity to undertake the strategic management of the agency.
- A new supervising social worker appointed since the last full inspection has needed to take two extended periods of leave at short notice due to circumstances beyond the agency's control.
- The responsible individual has not been available to oversee the service. He proposes to resign, and another suitable candidate is in the process of taking on this role.
- The agency is not at all times conducted in a manner consistent with its updated statement of purpose.
- The young people's guide does not yet include contact details for the Children's Commissioner or the regulator. It also needs updating to reflect staff changes.
- Further work is required to ensure that young people's views are collated and inform the development of practice. Similarly, there is no formal process to seek parent and professional views to inform and improve practice.
- Further development to the assessment of risks and vulnerabilities in relation to young people is required. All areas of known risk must be recorded, with strategies to demonstrate how the agency is helping to keep young people as safe as possible.
- Foster carers' reviews are not all completed in a timely manner, and where reviews need to come to panel, this has been delayed.
- The fostering panel does not have sufficient members to ensure that it can function effectively. The agency has been unable to constitute a panel for some months and currently has no agency decision maker or panel advisor.
- Some foster carers do not meet the national minimum standards in respect of completing and maintaining records and undertaking necessary training to ensure that individual needs of young people are met.
- Two young people are not yet registered with a general practitioner due to insufficient information being provided by placing authorities. The agency has not challenged this robustly enough to ensure young people's health needs are met.

The independent fostering agency's strengths

- Leaders and managers have made significant improvements since the monitoring visit in February. Not all of the requirements and recommendations are fully met. However, good progress has been made.
- Professionals using the agency describe friendly, helpful workers who communicate well. Representatives from the agency always attend important meetings about young people.
- Foster carers feel supported by the agency, finding the manager and the staff approachable, available and responsive.
- The supervising social worker has organised foster carer support groups, which sometimes have been combined with essential training such as first aid.
- The agency is working hard with foster carers to improve practice, meet standards and undertakes unannounced visits to check placements.
- The agency has a part-time member of staff who is dedicated to improving the quality assurance systems. He is sourcing and inputting data into a database, which will record and collate information.
- The interim manager is in the process of handing over the supervision of foster carers to the supervising social worker, with a view to enabling her to take on a more strategic role.
- The manager and supervising social worker have a good understanding of child protection and know how to report concerns to the appropriate agencies.
- Young people who go missing experience a better response from the agency in an attempt to reduce the risk of harm.
- The agency is taking necessary steps to check and vet all employees, panel members and staff to prevent unsafe people from having the opportunity to harm young people.
- Most young people are living in stable foster homes, are making progress and engage in a range of activities in the community.
- The panel chair is experienced and well qualified. She has some good ideas about how the panel will become more effective. Recruitment is underway for new panel members and an agency decision maker. The panel hopes to be fully functioning by June 2017.
- The agency has good initiatives going forwards for young people's participation, including an organised event at the London Eye in June 2017.

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 with the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
A review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider consider it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. The fostering service provider must on the occasion of the first review under this regulation, and may on any subsequent review, refer their report to the fostering panel for consideration. (Regulation 28 (2)(5))	08/09/2017
The fostering service provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service ("the statement of purpose"). The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner, which is consistent with its statement of purpose. (Regulations 3(1)(5))	08/09/2017
The fostering service provider must maintain a list of persons who are considered by them to be suitable to be members of a fostering panel ("the central list"), including one or more social workers who have at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience. The fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering panel has sufficient members, and that individual members have between them the experience and expertise necessary, to effectively discharge the functions of the panel. (Regulation 23(1)(7))	08/09/2017

Recommendations

- Implement a pro-active approach to risk assessment to better support foster carers in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of young people where they are known to exhibit potentially unsafe behaviours. (National minimum standard: 4.2, 4.5)
- Ensure that the views of the child, the child's family, social worker and independent reviewing officer are sought regularly on the child's care (unless in individual cases this is not appropriate). The supervising social worker should see them alone when undertaking visits. The agency must have mechanisms in place for ascertaining the views of young people to inform service development. (National minimum standard: 1.4)
- Ensure that all foster carers have clear personal development plans in place to evidence ongoing training and development appropriate to their development needs and to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the young people they are caring for or are expected to care for. In particular, foster carers should undertake training on information technology, internet safety, child sexual exploitation and risks relating to radicalisation. (National minimum standard: 20.5, 20.8)
- Ensure that panel provides a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to panel. (National minimum standard: 14.2)
- Ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. (National minimum standard: 14.8)
- Ensure that the fostering service provider's decision-maker makes a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel and, where applicable, the independent review panel, within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes. (National minimum standard: 14.9)
- Ensure that the children's guide is updated to reflect staff changes and includes the Children's Commissioner and Ofsted details if children wish to raise concern with inspectors or secure access to an independent advocate. (National minimum standard: 16.4)
- Ensure that children have prompt access to doctors and other health professionals, including specialist services (in conjunction with the responsible authority) when they need these services. (National minimum standard: 6.4)

Inspection judgements

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

Most of the young people experience stable and consistent foster care at this agency. Recording and monitoring of placements is improving. It highlights some of the gaps in care planning and foster care training. The agency can now identify and demonstrate more clearly where young people are doing well and where additional support is needed. It has also been possible to understand instances where foster carers are not working within the standards and to challenge these carers. Monitoring is also helping to identify foster carers' training needs to support the care of specific young people, for example attachment training and understanding self-harm.

Most young people have been in placement for over a year and some for up to three years. Most have had the opportunity to build trusting relationships and feel secure in their foster homes. The agency tends to provide placements for young people who have complex needs and who are considered difficult to place. In a few cases, the relationship between young people and their foster carers is less positive and is at risk of breaking down. Some of the recordings show less-sensitive care towards those young people who often present with difficult and challenging behaviours.

All young people are on roll in education, and most are engaging well and increasing attendance and attainments. For example, these include taking GCSEs in maths and English, improvements in literacy and numeracy, a nomination for 'learner of the week', and Level 3 qualifications in English, maths, science, and design and technology. The agency has used a new outcome tracker to demonstrate positive school attendance and give reasons for any decreases or problems. Most young people have over 89% attendance with some close to or on 100%. One child has increased attendance from not being in school at all to 60% attendance and, despite some short exclusions, is making good progress. When young people are not making expected progress, the agency's recording system is picking this up, which allows some analysis and enables the agency to offer additional support.

Young people are supported to enjoy a range of activities in school, at home and in the community. For example, some young people attend a discussion group called 'Youth Parliament', others attend swimming and football clubs. Most of the young people are well matched in terms of their cultural and faith needs. Young people are encouraged to follow their culture and religion, for example through the provision of halal meat and ensuring that they have the opportunity to pray or attend their place of worship.

As young people grow up into young adults, they are encouraged to become independent. For example, this includes having a weekly allowance to buy food, taking responsibility for cleaning their personal space, and doing their own shopping and meal preparation.

Young people are in good health, and their foster carers help them with routine appointments to stay healthy, such as regular dental checks, optician appointments and routine medical examinations. However, not all young people are registered with a general practitioner. The reason given is that the agency is waiting for further information from the placing authorities to expedite this process. Although no young people are at direct risk of harm from this shortfall, there is no evidence that the agency has robustly challenged the placing authorities to ensure that registration can take place.

The agency liaises with other agencies when young people require specialist support, for example child and adolescent mental health services, diabetic nurse input, orthodontist and the virtual school's intervention. On occasion, the agency has sourced services for young people to ensure that they do not miss out, for example providing transport to school and supervising contact with their birth families.

Young people spoken with during the inspection were very positive when talking about their foster carers. One young person said, 'I've been in other carers' homes, this is the best one.' Another said of his foster carer, 'I like how he listens, he knows how a child will feel.' Other young people commented, 'It's good living here,' and, 'I've got a nice room,' and, 'I get on well with everyone.'

However, other young people's recorded views were less positive about their experience in a foster home. One young person told the independent reviewing officer that they were not happy at the home, they had a problem with the food and the home environment. Another young person did not like the way the foster carer spoke to her and felt disrespected.

Placing social workers and commissioners reported that the agency is generally providing good-quality care and making a positive difference to young people. One placing social worker described how a young person, who presented challenging behaviour, was 'very happy', the foster carers 'coped really well' and 'go beyond expectations'. Where young people were less happy in placements, placing social workers acknowledged the difficulties and challenges and gave constructive criticism about how the agency could respond. No placing social workers had any safeguarding concerns. One stated, 'Despite everything, I have total respect for the foster carers; it is a big challenge.'

Young people are treated with dignity and respect, and foster carers support them to understand their background and history. Foster carers celebrate young people's achievements and are ambitious for them. For example, one foster carer is providing additional maths tuition to encourage and support one young person catch up in school. The school stated, 'We are positive he is getting the support he needs with his foster carers.'

The manager and staff team have been working hard putting systems into place to ensure that the views and experiences of young people are heard and acted upon. Young people's views are now routinely documented in the records, and there is evidence that the manager is responding to concerns raised. For example, one young person did not feel listened to, and the agency has arranged for the

independent reviewing officer to come out and talk to him. The agency has made good progress in listening to young people. However, further development is needed to incorporate these views into the ongoing development of services. Since the monitoring visit in February, the agency now undertakes unannounced visits to foster carers. The agency has also obtained and recorded foster carers' views about the agency and is aiming to do these twice yearly. The agency has clear plans in place to seek the views of placing authorities and other professionals. This ongoing process requires further development. The agency does not yet have significant contact with parents and has no formal system to incorporate their views about the services provided to their children.

The agency manager and team are working on other initiatives to improve young people's participation and contribution to the development of the agency. Some examples of these are a regular newsletter, involvement in charitable events, organising 'theme weeks', arranging day trips and developing a young people's group.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

The agency has continued to improve its practice in relation to undertaking individual risk assessments for young people. The agency social worker, in consultation with the foster carer, routinely completes these assessments. The agency is using a child sexual exploitation risk assessment tool, which is shared with the placing authority social worker on completion, for comments and/or additions. The agency also uses an individual risk assessment, which considers risk factors and offers strategies for foster carers to manage these risks. Some key risk factors seen on young people's referral information were not included in their risk assessments, so further development is required to ensure that these are more effective.

The response to young people who go missing has improved. The agency promptly reports young people missing, follows the missing protocols and attends strategy meetings to help consider how risks can be reduced. The agency, foster carers and placing authority social workers work together to ensure young people's safe return. Most of the agency's foster carers have now completed online training in the risk of child sexual exploitation, and this has helped raise their awareness of the issues. The manager has spent time with foster carers who have not completed this online training, given them individual briefings about child sexual exploitation and left training information for them to read. Case recordings show a greater awareness and understanding of the issues and the agency proactively suggesting actions to help keep young people safe.

The agency has made appropriate referrals to the local authority designated officer. It has delayed referring a quality of care issue to the panel for consideration as there are currently insufficient personnel to form an effective panel and no agency decision maker is in post. No young people have been at risk, as the agency has undertaken not to place any young people until a panel can consider this matter. However, a quicker conclusion to this matter would have been preferable. The

designated officer told the inspector that there were no concerns in relation to the safeguarding actions of the agency. However, there were concerns about the length of time it was taking to conclude this matter.

Recruitment checks in relation to agency staff and panel members have significantly improved. The manager has written job descriptions and person specifications for panel membership. Skype interviews have been organised and all the necessary employment and safeguarding checks required have been completed. This helps to ensure that young people are protected as far as possible from adults who may wish to cause them harm.

Foster carers have received more support to try to ensure that they can meet the needs of the young people in their care. The agency has been working hard trying to develop and support foster carers in this area. Some foster carers have been more receptive to this process than others. This is an area of continuing development for the agency. There is a training schedule planned for the year ahead, and the agency is highlighting areas such as internet safety in its newsletter. Increased supervisory visits and unannounced visits are helping to ensure that foster carers comply with national minimum standards. Some harder-to-reach foster carers have yet to complete training in the risk of child sexual exploitation and risk of radicalisation. Other areas for development and training include information technology, internet safety, risk of self-harm and attachment training.

The agency has recruited an independent social worker to undertake foster carer annual reviews. Most annual reviews are now completed and the agency proposes to bring all reviews to panel for consideration. Some of the reviews are overdue and there is a delay in bringing them to panel due to the agency having insufficient panel members at present. The acting manager is currently recruiting to the panel, and a panel date is scheduled for June 2017.

The agency is developing ideas to support and promote young people's positive behaviours, for example with certificates and/or gift vouchers. Some young people do not have positive relationships with their foster carers. This makes it more difficult for foster carers to use effective de-escalation techniques or alternative strategies to manage behaviour. Increased knowledge in conflict management and understanding how young people's past experiences impact on their current presentation would support more stable and secure relationships developing.

The agency has recruited a supervising social worker, and the acting manager is in the process of handing over all supervisory responsibilities to her. This process has taken longer than expected due to the social worker needing to take unexpected periods of absence. The supervising social worker is now back at work and the handover process continues. She is working hard to ensure that foster carers fulfil the expectations of the agency.

Young people reported to the inspector that they feel safe in their foster families. They were able to identify a trusted adult who they could talk to if they were worried about anything. One young person said, 'I know who I could talk to, but I don't need it all the time.' Young people know how to complain and have received a

copy of the children's guide. This guide requires updating to ensure that young people have the contact details of the regulator, the Children's Commissioner and to update staff changes.

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

The leadership and management arrangements for the service are beginning to be established; however, the agency has been through a difficult time since the previous manager left her post. The current interim manager has been in post since November 2016 and is in the process of becoming registered. The interim manager is appropriately qualified and experienced to undertake and fulfil this role.

The agency has recruited an experienced supervisory social worker who is taking over the supervision of the agency foster carers. The interim manager has been transferring the supervisory responsibility over to this worker. However, due to extended periods of absence this has taken longer than expected. The delay has meant that the manager has continued responsibility for supervising foster carers and been less able to focus on the improvement of the service. Despite this setback, positive progress continues to be made. The transition of work is well underway, and written records of supervisions with foster carers are available. The supervising social worker reported feeling supported by the interim manager, stating, 'She guides me and advises of the direction of the agency.'

The agency is continuing to recruit panel members. It currently has enough panel members to hold a quorate panel. However, the panel would be compromised if issues of conflict arose or panel members were unavailable for any reason. The agency is in the process of recruiting an experienced, independent person to fulfil the role of agency decision-maker. This appointment should be complete in time to hold a panel in June 2017. This appointment will offer a further level of independent scrutiny to the work of the agency.

The responsible individual has not been available and has had no significant role in overseeing the care practices delivered by the agency. The responsible individual proposes to resign this position, and the agency is in the process of appointing a new individual who has many years of experience and a social care background. Lines of accountability are becoming clearer, and the new staffing arrangements are suitable for the agency's needs. The impact of the new staffing arrangements remains relatively untested in practice as, although progress has been made, there has not been any panel activity or foster care reviews at panel since August 2016.

The agency has put effective systems in place to monitor the quality of care since the last inspection in October 2016. These systems are improving the feedback and monitoring that can take place and allow the interim manager to keep a better eye on progress or lack of it. Outcome trackers are being completed by the new quality assurance and administrator role. These processes are in their infancy, but are already helping the interim manager to monitor progress regularly and actively.

The agency has had no recent complaints. It has shown its ability to learn from concerns raised in the previous Ofsted inspection and monitoring visit. This has helped the agency to develop the service, think about and focus on areas of improvement. Good progress is made to meet the requirements and recommendations made during the recent inspection activity. The interim manager and the agency show a determination to improve and ensure that young people receive the service they deserve.

The manager understands the plans for children and works collaboratively with placing authorities to meet these. There are examples of positive progress for young people. The outcome tracker will, in time, record comparative data to evidence progress and highlight where support is needed. There are good initiatives to reward young people's progress and seek new ways to engage and include them in feedback and the work of the agency.

A fully effective system to gain feedback from staff, young people, placing authorities, parents and carers is not yet in place, although this process has started. The interim manager and quality assurance administrator continue to work on this area to gain views, which can help to develop and improve the practice of the service.

The manager has regular supervision from an independent person and provides supervision for the supervising social worker and administrator. Staff said that they feel supported by the agency. The focus of the interim manager since the last inspection has been on ensuring improvement to safeguarding practice. However, the next phase will be on developing better working together practice and delegation to enable the manager to take on a more strategic role to improve the agency further.

The culture of the agency is changing to work smarter, with better initiatives to include children and foster carers in their agency. The agency has moved its records to an electronic database. The records are well maintained and show good evidence of the work ongoing. The records help the interim manager to identify strengths and areas for development in practice.

Foster carers feel well supported. The agency records reflect regular monthly meetings and more challenge to foster carers to meet standards. Not all annual reviews have been completed within timescales. However, this is an area that the agency is working hard to address. The agency is getting better at giving effective challenge through supervision to ensure that carers meet expectations. They are not yet all providing the high-quality care expected. However, they are working hard towards this goal.

Recruitment of new foster families has been on hold, so the agency is not yet recruiting a range of carers to meet the diverse needs of children. The agency is offering placements for harder-to-place children and sibling groups and, although it is offering some specialist support, further development and support of foster carers through training is needed to manage this challenge. For example, this includes attachment training, restraint, risk of radicalisation and internet safety.

The fostering panel is not working effectively at present. Although panel recruitment is taking place, the agency needs to increase its central list if it is to be quorate and meet more regularly. The panel chair is experienced and well qualified. At present, the panel is not able to fulfil its quality assurance function, and this is an area which would support foster carers' training and skills. In addition, the members of the panel are not able to keep abreast of changes in fostering when the panel does not meet regularly. The panel has not met regularly enough to support and promote the agency development.

The interim manager has recently updated the agency's statement of purpose, but must ensure that all services offered by the agency are provided.

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 difference 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 who 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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