

Apple Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Lee Kirwin
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Apple Fostering Limited is an independent fostering agency based in Wembley, Middlesex. It carries out the recruitment, assessment, 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.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

There are significant shortfalls relating to the leadership and management of the service. Many of the requirements and recommendations for improvement made at the previous inspection remain unmet and are repeated as a result of this inspection.

The acting manager of the service also acts as the supervising social worker for all of the foster carers. She does not have sufficient capacity to ensure that management administration tasks and case recording are maintained or monitored. This means that she has no effective oversight of the quality of care provided to young people.

The agency's statement of purpose does not accurately describe the services offered

to support young people and foster carers. It has not been updated to reflect changes to the management of the service.

Management monitoring and quality assurance systems are ineffective. The agency does not collate information in respect of school attendance or incidents of young people missing from care. This means that managers cannot hold a clear overview of the outcomes for young people in order to spot trends or concerns.

Risks and vulnerabilities in relation to young people are not suitably assessed and no strategies are recorded to demonstrate how the agency is helping to keep young people safe. This places young people at risk of preventable harm.

Foster carers report that the agency supervising social worker visits regularly and offers helpful support. The agency was not able to produce sufficient records of foster carer supervisions to demonstrate how foster carers are supported to help young people stay safe and make progress.

The agency does not always complete recruitment checks to ensure that staff and panel members are suitable for the role and of good character.

Other than the foster carer's annual review, there are no effective mechanisms in place to consult with young people in order to understand how they experience being cared for.

The quality of the physical environment provided to young people is not of a consistent high standard. This means that not all young people have bedrooms that are homely or comfortable.

Most young people live in stable placements and are making progress.

Areas of improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meets 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
Regulation 11: The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that— (a) the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster	10/01/2017

parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. In order to meet this regulation, the agency must ensure that individual risk assessments identify the risk factors in relation to young people and identify interventions to reduce risks.	
Regulation 3: Statement of purpose and children's guide. Ensure that the statement of purpose provides accurate and current information about the services offered by the agency and the staff working there. (Regulation 3 (1)(b))	10/01/2017
Regulation 20: Fitness of workers. The agency must not employ staff unless 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)(c)).	10/01/2017
Regulation 22: Records with respect to fostering services. Ensure that the register of children placed with foster carers includes details of the child's address prior to placement and their address when leaving the placement. (Regulation 22 (1))	10/01/2017
Regulation 35: Maintain an effective monitoring system which focuses on improving the quality of foster care provided by the agency. This should incorporate the views of foster carers, young people and their placing authorities. (Regulation 35 (1)(b) and 35 (3))	10/01/2017
16: Education, employment and leisure activities. Implement an effective system for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance for children placed in foster care. (Regulation 16 (2)(a))	10/01/2017
28: Reviews and terminations of approval. (2) 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. (5) 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))	10/01/2017

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Develop systems for acquiring the wishes, feelings and views of young people in relation to monitoring and developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7)
- Implement a proactive 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. (NMS 4.2 and 4.5)
- Ensure that foster carers are aware of the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care protocols and procedures applicable to the area where they live, and to the young person placed. Enhance carers' understanding of the difference between young people who are 'absent without consent' and 'missing' in order that these incidents can be correctly categorised, appropriate action taken and proper records retained. (NMS 5)
- Members of the fostering panel must not also be involved in decision making. (The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, volume 4: Fostering services, page 39, paragraph 5.7)
- 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). (NMS 1.4)
- The supervising social worker should see young people alone when undertaking visits. The agency must have mechanisms in place for ascertaining the views of young people to inform service development. (NMS 1.7)
- Review all existing personnel files and ensure that written records incorporate all of the legally required information. (NMS 19.2)
- Ensure that all foster carers have clear personal development plans in place to evidence ongoing training and development appropriate to their 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 around child sexual exploitation, risks relating to radicalisation and first aid. (NMS 20.5 and 20.8)
- Retain a written record, at the fostering service, detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the

registered person. (NMS 24.5)

- Ensure that annual unannounced visits are undertaken to ensure that the physical environment, including the young people's bedrooms, are suitably maintained and provide a homely, nurturing environment. (NMS 10.2 and 10.5)
- Maintain a central list and implement written policies in relation to the recruitment of panel members. Panel members should be interviewed for the role and all employment checks completed. (NMS 14.1 and 19.1)
- Ensure that the duties and responsibilities of the manager are clearly understood by them, and that their accountabilities are clear. (NMS 17.4)
- Ensure that foster carers' files contain written records of formal supervisions. (NMS 21.8)
- Ensure that the agency decision maker provides a written record of the reasons for their decisions. (NMS 14.9)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

This judgement is inadequate because there are widespread failures in the systems designed to safeguard young people. The recording in relation to care planning, monitoring progress and outcomes for young people is poor. This means that the agency is not able to demonstrate how they are supporting foster carers to deliver care for young people in line with their care plans. The agency monitoring of foster care placements does not ensure that young people have bedrooms that promote a positive, nurturing experience of care. Most young people live in stable placements and make progress but the overall impression is that this is in spite of, rather than because of, the support provided by the agency.

Most young people engage positively in education. Foster carers work in partnership with schools to ensure that young people receive the support that they need to overcome barriers to success and improve attendance. The agency does not routinely gather information on the attendance and attainment for young people. This means that it is not always possible to measure their progress in relation to their starting points. The young people's case files do not always contain relevant plans in relation to their education. This means that it is not always clear how information from their health and social care plans is being used to inform interventions and support.

Placing social workers and commissioners report that the agency is providing good-quality care and making a positive difference to young people. One placing social worker described how a young person who presented with challenging behaviour and could not cope in previous placements had made 'remarkable progress'. Another social worker felt that a foster carer was 'the perfect match' for a young person. She went on to describe how the foster carer's knowledge of managing his complex health needs had meant that he was no longer going missing and was now able to engage in education.

Most young people are well matched in terms of their cultural and faith needs. However, there is no evidence in the agency case recording that they routinely consider or monitor how foster carers are meeting these needs. This increases the risk that cultural needs are not given sufficient importance.

The agency does not have mechanisms in place to ensure that the views and experiences of young people are routinely heard. Supervising social workers do not regularly meet with young people alone and there are no forums or opportunities for young people to say how they are experiencing being cared for in their foster

families. This means that the agency does not promote a culture whereby young people's views are central to care planning or learning and development plans for foster carers. It also means that young people do not regularly have an opportunity to share any concerns or worries with the agency social worker.

Young people were mostly positive when talking about their foster carers. One young person described how he really liked his 'foster mum'. He said the food was 'yummy'. The inspector observed a very caring and nurturing relationship with this carer. The young person said that he felt secure in the foster family and engaged in a range of positive activities within the family and in the local community. His bedroom was homely, cosy and full of pictures, toys, games and personal possessions. The young person was clearly very happy in his foster home and making excellent progress in education. This was evidenced by several awards and achievement certificates that were proudly displayed on his bedroom wall. The young person's foster carer understood his health needs and provided the care and attention that he needed to stay healthy and safe. Another young person spoke positively of his experience in the foster family. He said that he felt safe in the home and was clearly very attached to his carer, who 'looked after him well'.

One young person was less positive about their experience in a foster family. They expressed some concerns about the way that they felt treated and were unhappy with the bedroom, which they felt was 'too small'. The inspector viewed a number of the young people's rooms and found that they were not all of an acceptable standard. Two bedrooms had no pictures on the walls and had no features to suggest that they had been personalised in order to help young people develop a sense of belonging. One room had no lampshade, no mirror, rug or bedside lamp. Another room had a stain on the carpet and an unpleasant smell. Another room had mould on the ceiling. This lack of care and attention to the young people's personal space does not create a caring environment and is below the standards expected for young people living in foster care.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

This is a small agency and the number of foster carers has reduced since the previous inspection on 25 November 2014. The agency has only recruited one foster carer and there has only been one panel meeting during this period. There have been significant recent changes in the panel membership in recent months. The agency does not always ensure that panel members undertake an interview for the role and they do not always obtain and verify references when recruiting panel members. This means that the agency cannot be sure that the panel consists of

people who are suitable for the role and capable of providing a robust assessment of prospective foster carers. The first annual review for foster carers is not always presented to panel for scrutiny. This means that the foster carer's ongoing suitability for the role is not independently assessed. The panel is chaired by a suitably qualified and experienced professional. The panel includes qualified social workers who are registered with the Health and Care Professions Council.

The panel minutes do not always clearly record the reasons for their recommendations to approve foster carers. In addition, they also fail to record how potential safeguarding concerns are explored. The agency decision maker sits on the panel and plays an active part in discussing the suitability of carers. This compromises the independence of the panel and undermines the panel's ability to deliver independent challenge and feedback to the agency on the quality of care provided to young people.

The agency conducts annual reviews to assess the suitability of foster carers. These reviews are undertaken by a social worker employed by the agency. This social worker supervises the manager of the agency and is sometimes the agency decision maker. She also undertakes assessments of prospective foster carers. These management arrangements are confusing and this creates a situation of conflicting accountabilities. In practice, the manager is responsible for quality assuring the work of the person who is managing her.

Foster carers report that they value the support provided by their supervising social workers, but there is frequently no written evidence of formal supervision taking place. This means that managers cannot demonstrate how they are supporting foster carers or reviewing the care provided to young people. Agency staff undertake annual unannounced visits to monitor the physical environment provided by foster families. However, they do not record unannounced visits by the supervising social worker, in order to monitor the quality of care provided to young people.

The agency fails to obtain evidence from foster carers to ensure that they have successfully completed the Children's Workforce Development Standards for foster carers. They do not ensure that all foster carers have completed core child protection training. There is no clear workforce development plan in place to show how they ensure that foster carers are suitably trained. This means that the agency fails to ensure that foster carers have the skills and knowledge to care for young people and keep them safe.

Foster carers report that the agency social worker is knowledgeable, supportive and accessible. Several foster carers reported that they can access help and support at any time, day or night. They feel that because the agency is small, the supervising social workers know them well and understand their strengths and limitations. Foster carers also remarked that they felt the supervising social worker was 'alone', had 'too

much to do' and 'needed more support'.

Most foster carers demonstrate resilience when working with young people with challenging behaviour. They provide a caring environment and help young people to feel part of the family. They advocate strongly for young people within the professional network and have a good understanding of their health needs.

The agency takes an ethical approach to matching young people with foster carers. They only place young people when they feel confident that they can place them in a family that can safely meet their needs.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

Risk assessments in relation to the vulnerabilities of young people are delegated to foster carers, without any input or guidance from the supervising social worker. This is an abdication of the agency's responsibilities to protect and promote the welfare of young people. The impact of this is that some vulnerabilities are not addressed and, in most cases, there are no identified strategies to reduce the risk of harm to young people. This means that young people are at risk of preventable harm.

Foster carers are not always supported to ensure that they can meet the needs of the young people in their care. For example, when a young person presented as being vulnerable to radicalisation, the foster carer had undertaken no training in this area. In another example, a foster carer had not undertaken training in relation to the risks associated with child sexual exploitation, despite caring for a young person who was particularly vulnerable to such abuse. One foster carer was able to identify concerns and risks to a young person associated with their use of the internet. However, they did not implement the agency's policy in relation to internet safety. There were no parental controls to prevent the young person accessing unsuitable material and no systems in place to monitor internet usage. This demonstrates that vulnerabilities and risks go unnoticed and no action is taken to reduce the risk of harm to some young people.

The lack of formal supervision means that safeguarding concerns are not routinely discussed with foster carers. In addition, interventions designed to keep young people safe are not reviewed to ensure that they are effective. The supervising social worker does not see young people alone and this removes a significant opportunity for young people to share concerns and worries.

The agency policies and procedures in relation to young people who are missing or absent from care are not consistently applied, nor are they consistent with the placing authorities' agreed protocols and procedures. The agency does not collate

information in respect of young people going missing from care. Because of this, managers do not have the means to spot trends or patterns in order to inform or evaluate interventions to reduce the incidents of young people going missing from care. In practice, most young people do not go missing. Carers are vigilant, they notice when young people are not where they are supposed to be and take prompt action to ensure their safe return. However, practice in this area is not consistent. In one example, the agency and foster carer described the fact that a young person was not going missing over night as an indication that she was now safer. They did not take into account that the young person was often absent from school and missing during the day, and that this was a significant risk factor for this particular young person. This indicates a level of complacency and a lack of insight into risk factors. This places young people at risk of harm.

Recruitment checks in relation to agency staff and panel members are not robust. The agency does not always ensure that references come from a reliable source and does not always verify references when recruiting staff. This means that they cannot be sure that the staff they are employing are competent and of good character. They do ensure that all staff have a current check from the disclosure and barring service, to make sure that they do not have any current criminal convictions.

The acting manager is also the supervising social worker for all of the agency foster families. She does not have the capacity to effectively lead or manage the service. This lack of effective management oversight presents a significant risk that poor or unsafe practice may go unnoticed or unchallenged.

Young people report feeling safe in their foster families. Placing social workers and commissioners report that no concerns have been raised in relation to the standards of care provided to young people. The manager of the agency notifies Ofsted when any significant incidents occur.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Inadequate**

The leadership and management arrangements for the service are unclear. The previous registered manager left her post in December 2015 and there is not yet a registered manager for the agency. There are two qualified social workers employed by the agency, one of whom is the acting manager. The other social worker supervises the manager, sometimes acts as agency decision maker and undertakes some social work support work with foster carers. She also conducts the annual reviews for foster carers and assessments for prospective foster carers. She does not receive any formal supervision or have an annual appraisal. As no one oversees the

quality of her work, she does not have any opportunity to reflect on her practice.

The director of the company does not have a social care background and has no significant role in overseeing the care practices delivered by the agency. There is no responsible individual identified to provide oversight or leadership within the agency. The lines of accountability are blurred and it is not clear who is taking responsibility for the leadership and management roles.

There is no effective oversight of the quality of care or safeguarding practices within the service. There is frequently no record of foster carer supervisions taking place and the supervising social worker does not regularly speak to young people alone. This places young people at risk of harm and means that the agency cannot be sure that their foster carers are acting effectively to promote the welfare of young people.

The agency does not ensure that young people or foster carers meet regularly to share their experiences or participate in activities. They do not use the views of carers or young people to inform service development. The statement of purpose does not provide an accurate description of the services offered by the agency. Information in relation to the staff working at the agency is inaccurate. Some of the support services described in the statement of purpose are not available.

The shortfalls in relation to recording include an absence of local care plans in the young people's files. Management information is often not available or not easily accessible. This means that the manager of the agency fails to spot any trends or patterns and that service development lacks focus or direction. It also runs the risk that significant safeguarding concerns may go unnoticed.

The agency has made very little progress in addressing the shortfalls identified at the previous inspection. Requirements in relation to the agency's statement of purpose, recruitment checks, management monitoring, staff supervision and foster carer reviews, remain unmet. The inspector identified further shortfalls in relation to the safeguarding practice, leadership and management and quality of care provided by the agency. This shows that the agency lacks the capacity to improve the service and ensure that young people are safe.

The agency has recently experienced a significant period of change. The registered manager left and all of the personnel on the panel have been replaced. The acting manager has had limited time to improve the service and was not available during the inspection. This may have had some impact on the agency's ability to provide evidence for the inspection. Despite these circumstances, the agency was unable to provide a member of staff who had sufficient oversight of the service to facilitate the inspection. This raises serious concerns and indicates that the agency has insufficient resources to meet their statutory obligations, provide support to foster carers or ensure that young people are safe.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.