

Apple Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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: **requires improvement.**

This is the first inspection undertaken of this agency, which was first registered in October 2012. The agency has grown steadily since initial registration and currently has 15 approved foster carers in 10 carer households. These carers are presently providing placements for 13 young people. The agency has relocated, from Harrow, since registration and now occupies a single office in a large complex. Additional rooms are available as required, within the office complex, enabling the service to facilitate fostering panel meetings and foster carer training.

The Registered Manager is one of the company directors. As the only permanent staff member she took sole responsibility for foster carer recruitment and support until July this year when a qualified social worker was appointed on a part time basis. Social work and administrative staff have been occasionally utilised, on temporary contracts, to assist with office based tasks, to complete foster carer assessments and

to undertake specific support work with foster carers and with young people. The manager reflects a child-centred approach and a dedication to ensuring that the agency's foster carers provide positive experiences for young people placed and care, which helps young people to make real progress. The agency's real strength is in the high levels of support provided to its foster carers and in the dedication of foster carers to improving the lives and life chances of the young people they care for.

The manager has focused on practical tasks, and on the development of effective relationships with a number of local authorities who place young people. Structures, systems and recording practices have not been robustly developed within the agency to establish consistency of operation. Some of the agency's records do not contain all of the information required and so do not fulfil regulatory requirements. Staff supervision and appraisal and foster carer annual reviews often fall outside of required timescales. Staff recruitment practices are insufficiently robust. Training for staff, panel members and foster carers has no structure and this makes it appear random rather than clearly focused on progressive skill development.

The manager's capacity to properly monitor and control the activity of the service, and to identify patterns and trends, and so promote continuous improvement is limited by the lack of structure. This reduces the agency's capacity to fully demonstrate the impact that its sustained commitment to supporting foster carers is having on outcomes for young people.

The shortfalls identified have not significantly impacted on the standards of care that young people receive because their well-being and safety have consistently remained the priority for the manager, staff and foster carers.

Areas for 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 with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
3 (2011)	ensure that the statement of purpose provides accurate and current information about the services and facilities provided by the agency (Reg 3(1(b)))	31/01/2015
16 (2011)	implement an effective procedure for extracting information, for monitoring purposes, about the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster carers (Reg 16(2(a)))	31/01/2015
20 (2011)	ensure that full and satisfactory information, in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1, is available in relation to all persons employed to work for the fostering service (Reg 20(3(c)))	31/01/2015

22 (2011)	ensure that the register of children placed with foster carers includes details of the child's address prior to the placement and their address when leaving the placement (Reg 22(1))	31/01/2015
28 (2011)	ensure that a review takes place not more than a year after each foster carer's approval (Reg 28(2))	31/01/2015
30 (2011)	ensure that each foster carer's file contains a record, in relation to each child who has been placed, which gives the reasons for the termination of placement (Reg30(3(a)))	31/01/2015
35 (2011)	maintain an effective monitoring system, which focuses on improving the quality of foster care provided by the agency and incorporates consultation with foster carers, children placed and their placing authorities (Reg 35(1(b))) and (Reg 35(3))	31/01/2015

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- 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 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 (NMS 4.2, 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)
- ensure that foster carers retain written records of all medication administered to young people during their placement (NMS 6.11)
- ensure that foster carers have appropriate delegated authority given to them so that they have the maximum flexibility to make decisions about day to day arrangements for young people in their care (NMS 7.4; Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Vol 4 (3.10))
- ensure that fostering panel minutes provide accurate and clear coverage of key issues and views expressed by panel members and clearly reflect the reasons for the panel's recommendation (NMS 14.7)
- ensure that, when the fostering service suggests a foster carer to a local authority as a potential match for a young person, the written records demonstrate the skills the carer possesses to meet the assessed needs of the young person and that any gaps are identified and additional training needs, resources and support implications are clarified (NMS 15.1)
- 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 development needs and to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the young people they are caring for or expected to care for (NMS 20.5, 20.8)
- ensure that concerns raised regarding the standards of care provided by foster carers are thoroughly investigated and that, where those investigations identify that actions are needed, these are properly followed through (NMS 22.10)
- provide all persons joining the fostering panel central list with appropriate induction training and ongoing access to training and skills development to keep them abreast of relevant changes to legislation and guidance (NMS 23.9, 23.11)
- ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the panel chair, is reviewed annually against agreed performance objectives (Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Vol 4 (5.15))
- 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)

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

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The fostering service has two young people's guides, which provide a good range of age appropriate information and are colourful and easy for children and young people to understand. Where placements are planned young people are able to make a number of visits to the foster home beforehand, to meet the carers and other young people placed, and this helps them to settle in more quickly.

During the first six months of operation there were a number of placement breakdowns for young people. This was because the agency was largely responding to requests for emergency placements of young people with extremely challenging and unsafe behaviours, where little information was provided to clarify their care needs. This did not encourage positive matching of carers' skills with young people's identified needs and, although some of these young people demonstrably had some positive experiences, they were short lived and placements were not sustainable. The agency quickly developed a more robust approach to placement requests from local authorities. There are some good examples now of young people being very well matched to placements, which are meeting their needs extremely well. As a result their behaviours are improving, as is their quality of life, as they begin to make real progress in education, receive sound input to improve their physical and mental health, and experience positive life and leisure experiences. Young people, who struggled to make friends, are regularly attending local youth clubs and, in some cases, taking part in dance exhibitions. Some young people have benefited from opportunities to travel, for example visiting Jamaica with their carer.

Young people with complex medical conditions are being well supported to access regular health appointments and to develop the capacity to manage their medical conditions properly. Where young people are taking high levels of medication regularly their foster carers are not always diligent in recording this. In some instances carers are sharing their acquired knowledge of how to manage these health issues, with the young people's parents, and this is improving the young people's chances of returning home to their families. Some young people, through learning about eating healthily, have been helped to lose weight. One carer says: 'His health check said he was grossly overweight. I cook all the time and he learned to like it better than all the fast food. He lost almost three stone and looks great'.

Carers and young people are predominantly African Caribbean and young people are being robustly supported to value and celebrate their cultural heritage. For many young people behaviours which had the potential to place them at risk, are reducing because they are in a more settled environment and their support needs are recognised and met. This has also helped young people to improve their engagement with education. A young person who had very poor attendance when she arrived at the foster home now says of school: 'It's good. I will get good exam results now I think'.

Many young people see their placements as long term and feel they are acquiring skills to help them move more positively toward adulthood. One young person says: 'I want to stay here till I'm 18 and then move to independence. I'm learning here how to look after myself'. The young people appreciate being well cared for and kept safe. One says: 'they are all on your case a bit. I don't like it but they mean well'.

Foster carers are not always wholly clear about what decisions they are able to make in respect of the young people they have placed. They do understand that they are able to give permission for young people to stay overnight with friends. For young people not to feel any different to their friends, foster carers need to be supported to have the maximum decision making capacity in relation to day-to-day arrangements.

Foster carers listen to young people and represent their views well. Agency staff speak regularly to young people to make sure that they are happy in their foster homes and feel safe. This means that, on an individual, informal level young people feel able to express their views well. The agency recognises the need now to introduce opportunities for young people to come together so that their views can more effectively influence service development. The manager also recognises the need to better secure the views of foster carers' birth children in developing consultation opportunities.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Foster carer assessments have been of variable quality. The agency utilises independent assessors to complete foster carer assessments. Some have not been of the standard the manager expects, whilst others are evaluative and insightful and

give thorough consideration to potential foster carers' skills and abilities and their capacity to provide positive placements for young people. This has informed the manager's compilation of a list of preferred assessors. There has been one occasion when the first annual review of a foster carer was not completed within the twelve month timescale. The fostering panel retains good oversight of the quality of assessments and shares any concerns with the agency. This is a small agency and staff know all the young people placed very well. They have sound knowledge of young people's histories and individual needs and this promotes a very robust oversight of carers' capacity to meet those needs in a consistent and effective way.

The agency's foster carers are predominantly African Caribbean at the present time. As the agency grows steadily the diversity of its carer population is expanding. Current placements meet young people's needs well in terms of race, ethnicity and culture and in terms of carers' skills and capacities to meet the young people's very individual care and support needs. Written records, however, are sometimes poor at reflecting how this matching was achieved or at clarifying any support or training carers might need to better equip them to meet young people's needs. In practice the agency responds quickly and appropriately when additional support needs are identified for young people, for example by utilising support workers to give young people a positive male role model when placed with a single, female carer.

Although young people's daily records reflect their progress very well, the agency's capacity to extract that information so that the manager can monitor and properly evidence, for example, young people's improved attendance and educational achievement, is poorly developed.

Commissioning officers speak positively about the agency's capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to placement referrals saying: 'No one would accommodate him. This agency was able to provide carers who had experience in that area. The agency supplied full information about the carers' skills and experience. The match was good. The carers went way above and beyond their remit in getting the young person engaged with school and in fulfilling hospital appointments with him'.

Foster carers receive good support. A foster carer says of the manager: 'She guides and steers our practice whilst always remaining positive and wholly supportive'. Monthly supervision visits are undertaken by agency staff and these consider the carer's capacity to meet the needs of young people in placement as well as looking at any training, development and support needs the carer may have. Foster carers say that the training they have undertaken, with this agency, has been of a very good standard and helps them to care for young people safely and to promote positive achievements for those young people. Carers attain the Training, Support and Development Standards within timescale but the delivery of core training lacks structure because carers do not have development plans in place. There is also no clear identification of which courses are considered to constitute basic essential core training, for foster carers, or of the timescale for completion of core training. Panel members have not had access to relevant training opportunities and their annual appraisals, although now scheduled, are overdue.

A 'buddy system' provides additional support for foster carers and they find this invaluable for sharing good practice and for supporting each other through difficulties. The manager is working with carers to introduce support groups to enhance mutual support opportunities and to better facilitate information sharing by the agency as carer numbers grow. Around 50% of the agency's carers have transferred from other fostering agencies and these carers represent a good, varied range of skills and experience. This is a valuable knowledge base for newly recruited carers to tap into and benefit from as they learn about the fostering task.

The agency's fostering panel features a good range of relevant expertise. The panel chair is a local authority fostering and adoption service manager and is able to bring sound knowledge and expertise to her role. Because the manager of the service has been the only full time, permanent employee some practices have developed, which have the potential to compromise the transparency of panel operation. The manager supervises the completion of assessments by independent assessors, acts as panel advisor and is the designated Agency Decision Maker. A new Agency Decision Maker has been identified and this will improve that transparency. Currently the fostering panel minutes do not provide a good reflection of the views expressed by panel members, the concerns arising and how these are resolved, and the reasons for panel recommendations should be more effectively represented.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

The agency has a clear and comprehensive safeguarding policy, which has been approved by the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Foster carers receive regular child protection and safeguarding training. This makes sure that they are fully aware of their reporting and recording responsibilities should young people engage in behaviours, which place them at risk, or should they make an allegation. Placing social workers and placing authority commissioning teams consider that the agency's foster carers provide young people with good standards of care and prioritise the young people's safety well.

Individual safe care plans are in place for all young people placed but risk assessment is insufficiently well evidenced in written records. Foster carers and staff are able to describe in detail the additional safeguards they implement where young people exhibit behaviours, which place them at risk but these are not routinely incorporated into safe care plans. A good example of this is with regard to some young people placed who regularly fail to return to their foster home at the time agreed with their carers. In these instances carers are often contacting the local police because they are worried for the young people's safety. Although the agency's policies and procedures reflect clear guidance some carers are not wholly clear, when they are contacting the police, about the difference between a young person being absent without consent, at a known location, and being missing. Because of this carer recordings of such incidents often do not contain all of the required information. Young people's welfare is not compromised by this because the primary

focus demonstrated by carers is to make sure that young people return safely.

In some instances young people's propensity to go missing has reduced as their relationship with their carer has strengthened. One foster carer says: 'She used to go missing a lot. This has really improved. We managed to normalise it by getting her to tell me where she was going so I could ring her friend's parents and she could visit properly with permission. She's just so much safer now'.

Young people know how to complain though no complaints have been made, to date, by the young people. One allegation has been made. This was properly referred to the local authority safeguarding team and it was determined that the agency should investigate as a concern regarding standards of care. This was promptly undertaken. The agency ensures, as part of the annual, unannounced visit to each carer's home, that young people's accommodation is viewed and that young people are given the opportunity to raise any issues of concern. Where concerns arise regarding standards of care these are properly addressed but written records do not always provide a good reflection of the subsequent, sustained monitoring being undertaken by the agency in these circumstances.

The agency has established effective relationships with its placing authorities and is continuously developing those with other associated professionals. In some instances, where young people have potentially life threatening conditions, carers have been supported to access specialist health service training to equip them to confidently and competently meet young people's specialist health care needs. One of the young people's consultant notes: 'I am delighted to say that he has made tremendous progress since he was placed with this carer. He is much healthier in himself and is happy and settled'. One of the foster carers has attended training provided by the local police who are responsible for co-ordinating missing persons information. Subsequently she disseminated her learning from this to other carers.

When the agency was first registered, in October 2012, the only member of staff was the Registered Manager. She has remained the only permanent member of staff at this agency. During the last two years a number of staff have been employed, at various times, in temporary roles as support workers and form F assessors. The agency has additionally recruited to its central list of panel members. In July 2014 a part-time, temporary social worker was appointed. The manager has been insufficiently robust in terms of her staff recruitment and many personnel files do not contain essential, required evidence of safe recruitment. The manager has utilised personnel who are employed in, or retired from, social work posts with local authorities and, in many instances, are known to her from her own lengthy social work career. She has relied on the robustness of the local authority's recruitment procedures and her knowledge of people's work history. She has, for example, accepted telephone rather than written references and not always recorded these efficiently. There are good indications that these persons have been effective and efficient in fulfilling the roles to which they were recruited. Disclosure and Barring Service checks have been routinely completed, on all staff, to prevent unsuitable people from having direct access to children and young people. Foster carer recruitment practice is robust with the agency ensuring that all required checks are

completed before foster carers' approval is considered by the fostering panel.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

In the early days of operation, as the fostering service began to build relationships with local authorities, it took some inappropriate referrals. Several of these were detailed by the placing authorities as 'holding placements' whilst more suitable alternatives were sought. A number of those placements were not sustainable because of the very complex and unsafe behaviours the young people presented and because matching was sometimes based on inadequate information. The manager has worked pro-actively with local authorities to establish more effective working relationships, focused on open information sharing and prioritising positive outcomes for young people. The manager now has some very positive relationships with several local authority commissioners and both they and placing social workers speak positively about the agency's capacity to work co-operatively with them and provide stable and appropriate placements. The agency now has several young people in stable placements, which are meeting their needs well. Commissioners say: 'We have used Apple because they have been able to demonstrate they have carers with the skills we need'; 'The agency was extremely helpful and very responsive. They sent good information about carer skills and we made a successful placement'. Associated professionals speak particularly highly of the manager's sound relationships with young people placed, her commitment to carer support and her accessibility and professionalism. One professional says it is clear where the manager's priorities lie. She says: 'The manager is extremely committed, child-centred and loyal to the carers. She provides a high level of support to carers and evidences a dedication to making sure that carers are consistently meeting young people's needs well and promoting their safety and development'.

The usage of temporary staff, on a fairly random and ad-hoc basis has not supported consistent and sustained growth and development well. A part time social worker was appointed in July 2014 on a temporary contract, which has recently been extended, and this represents recognition of the need for the manager to develop a more systematic approach to driving the improvement of the service.

The agency's Statement of Purpose is aspirational rather than factual and contains a number of inaccuracies. For example it details that the final decision on termination of foster carer approval rests with the fostering panel and that the agency is inspected annually by Ofsted. Neither statement is factually correct.

Records relating to young people and carers are generally well retained and demonstrate the high level of support that both carers and young people receive. Some of the agency's records do not contain all of the information required. The register of children placed with the agency does not include details of addresses prior to, and on leaving placement. Placement records, in foster carers' files, do not always reflect the reasons why placements have ended. Records do not reflect that the manager and staff are receiving regular, effective formal supervision to develop

their practice.

Whilst the manager reflects extremely good knowledge of foster carers' skills and of the individual needs of the young people currently placed formal monitoring of the quality of practice is poorly evidenced. There is a lack of consistent reflection on how well agency practice meets regulatory requirements and is compliant with National Minimum Standards, hence the number of shortfalls highlighted within this inspection.

The manager is effectively guiding the progressive development of a service, which is recruiting and supporting foster carers who are responsive to young people's individual needs and are supported to meet those needs effectively and promote young people's growth and development. A more systematic and structured approach to service management is now needed to properly reflect the impact of this work on improving the care and progress of, and outcomes for, young people who are fostered with Apple.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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, 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.