

# Ideal Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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| <b>Unique reference number</b> | SC472125                             |
| <b>Inspection date</b>         | 23/01/2017                           |
| <b>Inspectors</b>              | Ms Hannah Bates<br>Ms Christy Wannop |
| <b>Type of inspection</b>      | Full                                 |
| <b>Provision subtype</b>       |                                      |

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| <b>Registered persons</b>      | Mr Benni Joseph<br>Mr Bharat Pattni |
| <b>Registered manager</b>      | Mr Benni Joseph                     |
| <b>Responsible individual</b>  | Mr Bharat Pattni                    |
| <b>Date of last inspection</b> | 20/06/2014                          |

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Ideal Fostering initially registered in 2009. It re-registered as a private limited company in January 2014. The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The range of placement types provided include emergency, long term, medium term, short term and parent and child placements. As at 31 March 2016, the agency had 134 children in placements and 81 fostering households, with 134 approved individual foster carers offering 170 fostering places. The service had three households (five carers) who exclusively provided short breaks.

### 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 agency is not good because safeguarding of children and young people is not robust. The agency does not follow its own safeguarding procedures and they do not always complete their own investigations after children and young people have made allegations. This potentially leaves children and young people at risk of harm. Risk assessments of children and young people lack rigour. They do not take into account important information relating to children and young people's history and risk-taking behaviours. The agency has not considered children and young people's risks prior to making decisions regarding matching. While there has been no known harm to any child or young person, the lack of rigour around risk management and safeguarding responses has the potential to impact on their safety and welfare.

Management oversight and monitoring is inconsistent. The agency's monitoring systems lack rigour. Leaders and managers do not make sure that they follow up after safeguarding or quality of care concerns. Leaders and managers do not use data and feedback to make child-centred improvements to the agency. Children and young people are not involved within the development of the agency, though plans are underway to work more directly with them.

Disruption of foster placement rates is in line with the current national average. Some matching decisions do not always focus on the child or young person's needs in relation to foster carer's skills, and this has the potential to impact on children and young people's placement stability.

Leaders and managers are very committed to their foster carers and social workers. A supervising social worker said: 'I really value the support from the team manager. She sorts things there and then.' Foster carers said: 'When there have been difficulties, our supervising social worker has always been on the end of the telephone and given us guidance with her vast knowledge. We feel we can talk to her about anything as she is very approachable.' A new appointment of a training coordinator has been a welcome addition to the agency alongside the recruitment of a therapeutic support worker. The agency has plans to create an 'independence project' for young people with the aim being to help young people transition into independence and provide mentoring for other young people.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered persons meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered persons must comply within the given timescales.

| Requirement                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Due date   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. This relates to matching and young people sharing bedrooms. (Regulation 11 (a))                                                                                                                                                | 07/04/2017 |
| Ensure that the fostering service provider prepares and implements a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect (Regulation 12 (1) (b))                                                                                                                                              | 07/04/2017 |
| Ensure that the fostering service provider prepares and implements a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and which provides in particular for written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response. (Regulation 12 (3) (d)) | 07/04/2017 |
| Ensure that the fostering service provider does not employ a person for the purposes of a fostering service 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))                                                                         | 07/04/2017 |
| Ensure that 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))                                                                     | 07/04/2017 |

## Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children and those significant to them are taken into account in monitoring foster carers and developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7)
- The registered person must ensure that no one may foster more than three children unless: the foster children are all siblings in relation to each other, or the local authority within whose area the foster carer lives exempts the foster carer from the usual fostering limit in relation to specific placements (in which case they must set out the terms as detailed below), and the foster carer's terms of approval allow it (any terms of approval must be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for even if an exemption to the usual fostering limit has been granted, unless the placement is in an emergency and for less than six days). (Statutory guidance – Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 1, page 16)
- Ensure that foster carers are trained in the management and administration of medication. (NMS 6.10)
- Foster carers and staff of the fostering service must be provided with the information and training necessary to ensure that they understand the particular challenges which children looked after face in fulfilling their maximum educational potential, and their role in helping to overcome these. They will require sufficient understanding of the education system to advocate on behalf of a child, to be the 'pushy parent' where the child may be experiencing difficulties in their educational setting. (Statutory guidance – Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 3. Page 104)
- The fostering service must also compile a children's guide to the fostering service, the details of which are set out in standard 16. It must be produced in a format which is appropriate to the age, understanding and communication needs of children who may be fostered by the service. In practice this means that it may be necessary to produce several versions of the guide, aimed at different age groups and including formats accessible to those with learning or communication difficulties. (Statutory guidance – Assessment and approval of foster carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services, Paragraph 4.3)
- Ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably

be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. (NMS 15.1)

- Ensure that in the foster home, each child over the age of three should have their own bedroom. If this is not possible, the sharing of a bedroom is agreed by each child's responsible authority and each child has their own area within the bedroom. Before seeking agreement for the sharing of a bedroom, the fostering service provider takes into account any potential for bullying, any history of abuse or abusive behaviour, the wishes of the children concerned and all other pertinent facts. The decision-making process and outcome of the assessment are recorded in writing where bedroom sharing is agreed. (NMS 10.6)
- 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. (NMS 14.9)
- Ensure that the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection and staff and panel member recruitment. This includes CRB checks. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff are trained in, understand and operate these good practices. (NMS 19.2)
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action is taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. (NMS 25.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Overall, young people make good progress. Children and young people have good attendance in educational settings. Foster carers support young people to attend further education such as colleges and apprenticeship schemes. Some foster carers have supported young people to learn English and have mentored and encouraged them with their literacy skills. Leaders and managers seek feedback from children and young people's educational settings. However, they do not seek this information routinely and children and young people's files lack statutory documents such as personal educational plans by which social workers can monitor children and young people's progress more efficiently. Some foster carers have gone above and beyond to make sure that the children have as many opportunities as possible. For example, some foster carers have sourced specialist health input and ongoing physiotherapy to improve their child's mobility and independence.

Children and young people have good opportunities to be involved in sports and extracurricular activities such as drama clubs, football and cricket. Some young people are involved within the local authority Children in Care Council which they enjoy attending. Foster carers are skilled at finding and engaging children and young people in activities within their communities. Children and young people have friends. Foster carers understand the importance of knowing who their friends are and support learning around 'stranger danger'. A young person said: 'I have friends over, and when I go out my foster carer says I have to call her when I get there and she has to know where I am.'

Overall, children and young people speak positively about their foster carers. Some foster carers support their foster children into adulthood under 'staying put' arrangements. Placements are stable. Children and young people feel part of a family. A young person said: 'With our foster carer, it is like we are a family. We go on trips and holidays.' The agency keeps sibling groups together. Foster carers are skilled at supporting children and young people's relationships with their birth families, recognising that this is a fundamental aspect of their emotional development and placement success. The agency is committed to supporting young people's identity. They focus on making sure that children and young people's religious and cultural needs are met.

Children and young people's feedback does not influence the development of the agency. The agency does not make sure that they provide good enough opportunities for all children and young people to provide feedback, such as when they do not read or write English or have specific learning needs, for example. The registered manager does not always act when children and young people raise their concerns about their quality of care or feelings. Children and young people are not involved in what their foster carers or the agency read or write about them. Children and young people say that they have little involvement with the agency itself. While the young person's guide provides children and young people with important

information about how to complain or get their views known, it is not age-appropriate for younger children and does not take into account language or learning needs.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Since the last inspection, the agency has grown in size. The agency has grown confidently through foster carer family and friend's recommendations. Panel members are well prepared and challenge the agency where appropriate and where further information is needed. Recent training for social workers in the assessment of foster carers has led to more rigorous and analytical assessments. On occasion the agency has not responded to the panel's request for further information at annual review before making a decision. Annual review documents do not always contain enough information about any relevant allegations, complaints or concerns about foster carers. This means that the agency does not allow panel members to exercise their full role and responsibility.

Matching of children with foster carers does not focus sufficiently on the skills of foster carers or their preferences, or the space they have available. There have been poor decisions made regarding placements, with the focus having been on the request of the placing authority rather than what is in the best interests of the foster carers and child or young person. On occasion foster carer agreements are not updated to reflect changed approval categories. The fostering service does not set categories for age or number in their approval, and this is not consistently revisited in foster carer annual reviews. Foster carer preference is not an explicit, documented part of the matching process. On occasion a disregard for the numbers of children and young people being fostered in a household has meant that space for sleeping and bathing is insufficient and young people share bedrooms. This does not promote children and young people's welfare.

The registered person is not rigorous in interpreting and applying statutory guidance about the usual fostering limit of three foster children in a foster home. They have wrongly confused guidance about terms of approval with guidance about exemptions. Managers have not applied for an exemption from the host authority for every placement of children outside the usual number, where stays have been less than six days. Foster carers risk unwittingly being considered to be carrying on a children's home for the purposes of the 1989 Act and the Care Standards Act 2000 and would need to be registered as such with Ofsted. The quality of information provided to host authorities is also not always good enough to enable them to make an informed decision. For example, managers do not always provide sufficiently full information in relation to risks relating to the new children, or the sleeping arrangements, or why the exemption is in the best interest of the child. This means that children's welfare and safety may not be protected.

Foster carers say that they feel well supported by their supervising social workers: a

foster carer said, 'The agency has a relaxed approach to fostering. They get it spot on. They have given us lots of support with teenagers and because of that I have a strong bond with the registered manager and responsible individual. I think the agency is brilliant.' Overall, supervisions are regular. However, they do not always document and track the progress of children and young people or use statutory documents to inform their review of the fostering task. Foster carer support groups are in the early stages of revitalisation.

Training is improved and the agency have adopted a much more rigorous approach to ensuring that foster carers continue with their professional development due to the impact this has on children and young people's outcomes. The agency has been creative in ensuring that foster carers complete the training and development standards within their first year of fostering. The agency incentivises attendance at other training and has made a range of face-to-face and online training available for hard to reach carers. A new training coordinator has put together a detailed and full annual training programme. Supervising social workers monitor foster carers training through supervisions. A planned new annual training programme supports foster carers in the quality of care that they provide for children and young people. However, this does not currently include training in important areas such as medication, child health or education. Consequently, foster carers may not know how they can best support children and young people's progress and outcomes.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Safeguarding of children and young people is not good because the agency has not followed their own safeguarding procedures. The safeguarding policy is not helpful in ensuring prompt decision making and referral by those identified as the safeguarding lead, rather than the directors of the agency. On occasion, the agency has not made appropriate referrals about foster carer allegations to the designated safeguarding officer in the local authority. The agency has failed to investigate children and young people's allegations and concerns. They have not always made sure that they have spoken with children and young people nor have they made sure that they have communicated effectively with foster carers using interpreters where necessary. Investigations lack rigour and analysis. This has potentially left children and young people at risk of harm.

There is a lack of professional curiosity regarding safeguarding incidents. For example, after safeguarding allegations and incidents, the agency does not review information or incorporate learnings into foster carers' annual reviews or safer caring plans. They do not keep a written record of what actions they have taken as an agency in response to allegations and safeguarding incidents. There has been a significant lack of monitoring after there have been allegations about foster carers. For example, where the agency has made recommendations regarding further training or supervision for foster carers, it has not made sure that it has fulfilled its safeguarding responsibilities. Recommendations drift and consequently children and young people are potentially exposed to further harm. When supervising social workers raise potential safeguarding concerns during supervisions, there is a lack of follow-up action taken to explore the information further. Foster carers still do not consistently have a summary of any allegation made about them, or the outcome. This is an unmet recommendation from the previous inspection.

Children and young people's risk assessments are poor as they do not take into consideration children and young people's potential risks when considering placements. Risk-taking behaviours are not given enough consideration during the matching process or as part of respite planning arrangements. Because the agency does not document the number of children and young people who can be fostered within a household, living arrangements and sleeping arrangements are unclear. In one instance this has resulted in young people sharing a bedroom without having rigorously assessed any potential risk this may pose.

Recruitment of supervising social workers and panel members lacks rigour. For example, the agency does not always take up references, and relies on third party references given to previous employers. Panel members recruited for their independence, have references from people who work for the agency. Gaps in employment are not accounted for. Managers' report they undertake training in safer recruitment, but practice is not consistent with good safeguarding practice.

The agency has positive relationships with the local authority Designated officer. The

recent appointment of the team manager as the safeguarding lead for the agency means that potentially there will be more clarity and accountability within safeguarding. The agency has taken on board some learning from previous placements where matching had been poor, for example, regarding young people who have been involved with child sexual exploitation. For some young people, there has been a decrease in risk-taking behaviours since coming into placement. Some foster carers have worked effectively with other professionals to reduce the risk of harm to young people through risk-taking behaviours such as missing and child sexual exploitation.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Managerial oversight and monitoring is not robust. Leaders do not provide a strong focus on safeguarding. They do not make sure that actions from investigations are completed. They have failed to meet a recommendation from the previous inspection and continue to not consistently document case summaries after safeguarding incidents. The agency does not seek the independent views of children and young people and so the agency is not developing from a child-centred perspective. Foster carer supervisions do not always make clear how care practice issues have been followed up, or ensure progress for children through focus on actions from their child in care reviews.

Managerial review and monitoring is largely statistical and lacks evaluation or self-critical analysis. Managers do not try to find out the reasons for foster carers moving from the agency or the reasons behind placement breakdowns. There is on occasion a lack of professional curiosity and so important information is lost which the agency could learn and develop from. The agency systems for gathering data are inefficient as they do not always gather all of the information or document it appropriately. For example, the agency does not monitor children and young people's education or health outcomes. There is a lack of analysis of data and what this means for the agency. Internal or external scrutiny is not used for qualitative analysis. Consequently, the agency does not use data to drive improvement within their service.

Supervising social workers and foster carers feel well supported by the leaders and managers. They find managers accessible and caring. The registered manager is always available to provide support and guidance to foster carers 'day or night'. Foster carers see the management structure and support that they provide as one of the reasons that they are with this agency. Supervising social workers say: 'Things have improved in the agency, such as the case support we receive. Managers listen to staff and we now have case discussions'. Leaders and managers make sure that supervising social workers and foster carers have access to resources that they need or request, such as specific therapeutic parenting courses or practice educator courses. The agency is committed to making the agency a learning environment and as such has encouraged students to complete their university placements within the

agency. They view students as a rich resource.

This agency has grown from a small, family model, owned by two social work colleagues, to a larger, more structured agency. Systems and roles are in development. Improvements have been made: training plans and achievement; more reflective social work supervision; two new support workers; a new post of therapeutic support worker. These changes do not yet show impact, but show an agency that is moving forward. Directors and the registered manager are very accessible and responsive to foster carers.

## 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.