

Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Ltd

Investaco House, Unit 14, Invicta Way, Manston Park, Ramsgate CT12 5FD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency provides long-term or permanent placements, short-term or emergency placements, bridging placements, parent and child, short-break or respite placements and a small number of specialised placements for disabled children or young people. In addition, 'staying put' arrangements are in place for young people to remain with carers into adulthood. At the time of this inspection, the agency has 13 households, with 15 children placed.

There has been no registered manager since March 2023.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 June 2023

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: 18 March 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Children make progress because of secure relationships with their foster carers. Foster carers provide children with consistent parenting that enables them to build relationships that are based on trust. Children describe feeling 'part of the family,' and being like 'normal teenagers'. This helps some children to thrive. However, the progress for some children is undermined by the shortfalls identified in safeguarding and the leadership and management of the agency.

Careful consideration is given to matching. The skills of foster carers are matched to children's needs. Consideration is also given to other children living in the home. Birth children's voices are heard and those of children already fostered. One child enjoys being a positive role model for other children arriving in the UK for the first time. He says, 'I owe my life to my foster carer. Because of him I will soon be going to college.'

Children's identity is valued. Foster carers support the children to follow their cultural customs and beliefs. They learn about the children's cultures, prepare special meals and link the children to relevant community members to ensure that their specific needs are met.

Education is promoted. Some children have significantly increased their school attendance. Others are making plans to attend sixth form colleges and further education placements. Two siblings no longer require specialist support due to the progress that they have made since being cared for by their foster family. These are some examples of the progress that the children have made as a result of the care that they receive.

Foster carers keep good-quality records. They detail the children's day-to-day routines, their successes and when days have been more difficult. One foster carer writes to the child. For example, 'I am really proud of you today, as you supported a friend who was having a difficult time.' These records will make powerful reading for the adult the child will become in time.

During the period of COVID-19, adaptations were made. Participation continued through online video calls. Children and foster families were engaged in quizzes and 'visits' took place virtually. Some families were still able to have 'day respite', with children going on socially distanced walks with the responsible individual. Everyone spoken to during the inspection was pleased that when restrictions lifted, face-to-face events resumed.

A children's council, which includes all children living in fostering households, meets several times a year. Children's voices are heard and changes made, for example, there have been changes to the monthly newsletter and summer trips have been organised. The children's guide is available in languages to suit the children's needs.

However, some information in the guide requires updating. For example, the current guide does not contain the correct contact details for external agencies.

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

On the whole, foster carers keep the children safe. However, some of the children have had variable experiences. There have been occasions when the supervision of children has slipped. In one example, a child with known risky behaviour was insufficiently supervised around other children and an incident occurred. This resulted in the foster carers ending the placement. Furthermore, the foster carers used physical restraint which frightened the child. This shortfall was identified at the last inspection and has not been fully addressed. In another example, a foster child was cared for by an adult who had not had the required safety checks. Although there was no impact on the child on this occasion, children should only be cared for by suitably vetted and assessed adults if their foster carers are not available.

Safeguarding concerns are promptly reported to external agencies. When appropriate, concerns are shared with safeguarding partners. The local authority designated officer reflected that the information the agency shares is appropriate, timely and relevant. However, not all reports are sent to the regulator on time and frequently no updates are made, for example, when a missing child returns. This prevents the regulator having timely oversight of safeguarding concerns.

In one case, foster carers have been providing excellent support for a child when they go missing from home. For instance, they liaise with other parents in the child's network and have ensured the child has successfully returned home on many occasions. Despite the best efforts of the agency and foster carer, missing-from-home incidents have continued for this child and their placement is due to end.

Children's safer care plans are individualised to their needs. They are well thought out and provide foster families with clear strategies to manage risk and keep children safe. However, they are not consistently reviewed as children grow and develop, to ensure that strategies are adapted to children's changing needs. For example, when one child presented escalating risks, their safer care plan did not reflect the new behaviours or the strategies for foster carers to use to reduce the risk.

The fostering panel meets face to face. An experienced chair is in place and a new agency decision-maker (ADM) is in the process of being recruited. However, at the time of the inspection, the proposed ADM does not meet the requirements of the national minimum standards. This is because they are not part of the senior leadership team or a director of the agency. Panel minutes are clear. However, on occasion, questions asked at panel are not fully resolved. Furthermore, there is no formal process for ADM decisions to return to panel and on occasion they have not been actioned. This is a missed opportunity for the ADM's advice to be followed. Additionally, there is no care-experienced person on the panel list.

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

Changes in leadership and management have impacted negatively on the service. A new manager has been in post for a number of weeks. He has already made a positive impact. All the staff spoken to have confidence in the new manager. He is creating a learning environment where social workers can reflect on practice and develop their skills. This is underpinned by frequent supervision that results in clear objectives and actions.

New staff have been recruited. They all speak positively of their induction and feel well supported by the manager and the responsible individual. Student social workers are given learning opportunities, such as taking part in the assessment of prospective foster carers and supervising foster carers. However, it is not currently clear who is directly supervising these learning opportunities and taking responsibility for them.

When complaints are made, they are quickly responded to. Records include the investigation and where appropriate changes in practice occur. For example, a driving policy was updated when a child raised concerns regarding a staff member's driving. However, records do not show the detail of the complaint being explored and it is unclear if the complainant has been informed of the outcome or if they are satisfied. This is a missed opportunity for the agency to ensure that complaints are adequately resolved.

Oversight by managers is not effective. There are no records of formal monitoring by managers since the last inspection in 2019. This is a significant gap in the agency's practice and a missed opportunity to provide a clear layer of scrutiny and challenge of the work undertaken. For example, gaps in the assessment and review of foster carers noted during the 2019 inspection remain unaddressed. In one case, the views of an adult living in a foster home did not feature in the report presented to panel. There are also gaps in standards of care assessments and questions that remain unresolved regarding foster carers' conduct.

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, The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
<p>The fostering service provider must—</p> <p>keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children’s guide, notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 (a)(b))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that the details of external agencies are correct in the children’s guide.</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>
<p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that—</p> <p>no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. (Regulation 13 (2)(b))</p> <p>This requirement is repeated.</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>
<p>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.</p> <p>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))</p> <p>Specifically, ensure that a care-experienced person participates in each panel.</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>
<p>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>

<p>to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent,</p> <p>where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given,</p> <p>to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent, and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate—</p> <p>on the first review carried out in accordance with regulation 28(2), and</p> <p>on the occasion of any other review, if requested to do so by the fostering service provider in accordance with regulation 28(5), and</p> <p>to consider any case referred to it under regulation 27(9) or 28(10). (Regulation 25 (1)(a)(b)(c)(i)(ii)(d))</p> <p>Specifically, panel must demonstrate a robust process where questions that are raised are resolved. Furthermore, there must be a specific system implemented that ensures ADM questions are returned to the next panel, feature clearly on the agenda and are evidenced and actioned.</p>	
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals, and</p> <p>improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency.</p> <p>The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted for the purposes of paragraph (1) and, on request, to any local authority.</p> <p>The system referred to in paragraph (1) must provide for consultation with foster parents, children placed with foster parents, and their placing authority (unless, in the case of a fostering agency which is a voluntary organisation, it is also the placing authority). (Regulation 35 (1)(a)(b) (2) (3))</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the</p>	<p>15 September 2023</p>

registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table.

Notifications must be made via the online system in a timely manner and contain clear and full information.
(Regulation 36 (1) (2))

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that unqualified staff and volunteers who carry out social work functions do so under the direct supervision of experienced social workers who are accountable for their work. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.7)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person in the fostering service or is a trustee or director of the fostering service who is a social worker with at least three years post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.12)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: SC062080

Registered provider: Following Whispers Family Service Consultancy Limited

Registered provider address: Unit 14, Invicta Way, Manston Park, Ramsgate
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Responsible individual: Paula Henderson

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01843 850258

Email address: Christopher.woods@foster-care.org

Inspector

Sarah Olliver, Social Care Inspector

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