

Shining Stars Fostering Agency Ltd

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The Lansdowne Building, 2 Lansdowne Road, Croydon CR9 2ER

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency provides foster care placements for asylum-seeking children, parents and children, individuals and sibling groups. The fostering agency supports emergency, short-term and long-term placements. Asylum-seeking children make up over 70% of the current placements.

The company's two directors have held the roles of responsible individual and registered manager since the agency registered with Ofsted in March 2016.

At the time of the inspection, the fostering agency had 77 approved fostering households with 126 children in placement. A small number of young adults continue to live with their foster families under 'staying put' arrangements.

Inspection dates: 19 to 23 June 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **outstanding**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **outstanding**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 18 November 2019

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children make exceptional progress while living with their foster families. They have very positive experiences and their progress improves the longer they remain living with their foster families. This is particularly true for children new to the UK who are seeking asylum.

The fostering agency offers children a tailor-made service that expertly meets their needs. From the outset in their placements, children receive clear information about the fostering agency and what to expect. There are three children's guides. The first two are written in English and are designed for primary-school-age and secondary-school-age children. The third guide is available in English and in other commonly used languages, for children who prefer to read in their primary language. This guide provides a summary of the services provided and, in addition, useful information and resources that explain the asylum-seeking process. This is of great benefit to children to help them understand UK immigration processes.

Children's identity needs are very well met by the agency. The matching process is highly effective in matching children with foster carers who provide them with high-quality care. All asylum-seeking children receive visits from the agency's support and participation worker.

Specialist staff offer children one-to-one support if there are tragic situations in the areas where children originate from. This was the case for the recent earthquake in Turkey and the crisis in Afghanistan.

Children feel listened to and involved in their care, and say that their foster carers and the agency staff have a genuine interest in helping them to meet their full potential. Children have a strong sense of belonging and feel loved and secure with their foster families. However, the agency does not consistently obtain the views of parents who are living with foster carers in parent and child placements.

Some children are supported to locate their families abroad and resume communication. This offers children a sense of peace and comfort and helps to allay their fears of not knowing what has happened to their family members. One child told the inspector, 'I am very happy here. Everything is in place. I love my [foster] family and they love me. We have the same religion and we speak the same language. They understand me. They are my family.'

The fostering agency's youth council and support workers ensure that all children have an opportunity to share their views and opinions about the agency. The group has been instrumental in involving children in the recruitment and training of staff and prospective foster carers. Children regularly assist managers in designing literature and most recently helped with the introduction of a multilingual app. This

enhances the way children are consulted and ensures that their voices are heard as the agency develops.

Children with complex health and medical needs make significant improvement while living with their foster families. Foster carers are skilled in understanding the wishes and needs of disabled children in their care, including children who are non-verbal.

Children benefit from foster carers' knowledge and skills in working with, for example, life-limiting medical conditions, autism spectrum disorder and global delay. They have experience of improving children's communications skills. In some cases, children who were previously thought to be non-verbal are now able to say simple words and phrases and indicate their choices. Previously, this was not their experience.

Children's learning needs improve significantly from their starting points. Many of the children arrive in the UK speaking languages other than English. Staff, foster carers and the agency's education consultant work closely with schools and colleges to ensure that children's learning needs are known and are well met. The education consultant frequently monitors children's academic progress, their attendance and attainment at school and college. When progress is not as expected, the agency intervenes to ensure that children's learning outcomes improve.

Children have fun and enjoy many opportunities to visit places of interest and take part in trips and events arranged by the agency. For example, recently, all children and their families were invited to attend a trip to a waxworks museum in London. Children based in the Midlands also regularly attend events. The agency celebrates various festivals and activities and hosts celebration events, acknowledging the achievements of children, foster carers and staff. At the request of children, the agency now fields a cricket team that is open for all to join.

The agency prepares older children well for adulthood. They benefit from the input of their foster carers and the agency's support workers. For example, when they leave their foster carers' homes, the agency provides all young people with a leaving care 'starter pack'. Essential leaving care information, plus linen, a toaster and kettle, among other items, are included to support young people's transition to independent living. A number of young adults remain living with their foster carers in 'staying put' arrangements. This allows them to remain with their foster families and maintain existing relationships, for continued support and guidance.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: outstanding

The agency places great emphasis on, and has a commitment to, keeping children safe from abuse and neglect. Children say that they feel safe with their foster families and know that their families would protect them if they faced danger or harm. The agency's safeguarding senior practitioner is instrumental in monitoring and reviewing any known or anticipated risks to children. Detailed safety plans highlight what needs to be in place to help keep children safe.

The agency's safeguarding senior practitioner, managers and leaders ensure that the protection of children is understood to be the responsibility of everyone in the agency. This is well evidenced in practice. Staff provide foster carers with prompt and bespoke training and coaching if required, to equip them with the skills and resources to support children who are deemed to be at risk of harm. All children in care receive the agency's 'comfort box', which contains a safeguarding toolkit. The pack provides children with advice and resources that address key safeguarding themes, such as grooming, cyber-bullying and gang affiliation.

The agency designates one week annually for managers, staff, foster carers and children to focus solely on exploring issues of child protection. During this week, staff and foster carers review safeguarding training, policies and procedures. Collectively, the agency reviews related research materials such as serious case reviews. This helps them to explore, discuss and implement any learning points.

The agency keeps meticulous records of all incidents that potentially pose risks to children. Staff and managers regularly explore emerging concerns in management and staff forums to devise effective safety plans. The safeguarding senior practitioner is responsible for devising comprehensive risk assessments, together with staff and foster carers. These highlight risks to children and include clear strategies to help to reduce risks to children.

There are creative and effective systems in place to help reduce incidents when children are missing from care. Children receive 'Here for You', an easy-read booklet that describes the agency's obligation to do all it can to promote children's safe return home. The booklet includes the contact details of relevant child protection agencies and advocates. The information also includes the contact details of the agency's directors, for children to contact directly if they wish. When children return home, staff complete the agency's own safe and well-being assessment. Staff and foster carers work effectively with safeguarding professionals to help encourage children's safe return home.

Children are generally not involved in offending behaviour, gang affiliation, the misuse of substances or alcohol, or self-harm. When these do happen, children and foster carers receive support and advice that help children to be safe.

Children's positive behaviour is promoted. Foster carers receive training in de-escalation techniques and they complete therapeutic training. The agency's therapist works with staff and foster carers to support them to provide trauma-informed care to children. Children can also have sessions with the therapist to receive help to safely manage their feelings and behaviour.

Complaints and allegations against foster carers are rare. When allegations are made, they are reported and leaders and managers take prompt and appropriate action. Internal investigations are thorough, ensuring that there is good communication with external professionals.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The leadership and management of the agency are highly effective in meeting the agency's stated aims and objectives. In addition to the registered manager and responsible individual, the agency employs a service manager to assist with the governance of the fostering service.

Leaders and managers have extremely high aspirations for all children in their care and the development of the staff team. Senior staff participate in weekly and monthly meetings that review, for example, the protection, education and well-being of children. Managers and leaders strive to continue to develop the fostering agency so that children have a voice in the agency, make significant progress and meet their full potential.

The agency's monitoring reports and development plans are comprehensive and highlight the agency's aims to further improve services to children. For example, managers are reviewing the need to expand in the Midlands area, where a small number of the agency's foster carers live. The very regular overview of the fostering service prompts change and innovation. This results in improved outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers have considerable expertise in meeting the needs of asylum-seeking children; they and the entire staff team work effectively with relevant external agencies. This includes for example, the Refugee Council. This is in the interests of children, who clearly benefit from this level of expertise.

Staff are very well supported and they receive regular and meaningful individual, group and reflective supervision. Staff all say that they are very well led by the management team. Managers complete staff appraisals each year to ensure that staff development needs are met. A member of staff said, 'I feel very lucky working here, as they offer such a high level of support for children, so you always feel advocating for them is easy. More importantly, the agency really cares about children and young people.' Managers ensure that the recruitment systems for staff and panel members are comprehensive and in line with safe staff recruitment practices.

Staff work in very close collaboration with each other and foster carers. This promotes consistency and stability of foster care placements. Specialist staff such as the education consultant, the safeguarding senior practitioner, the therapist and the support team also work very closely together. This helps to provide children with stable foster care homes. Unplanned endings do not happen often.

The fostering panel promotes safe and secure foster care placements. The fostering panel functions robustly; the process is orderly and democratic. Panel members have good experience and expertise in their chosen fields, which are relevant to the fostering task. The administration of the fostering panel is highly organised.

Foster carer assessments presented to panel are detailed and analytical. The agency also has a youth fostering panel that is a feature of the fostering panel process. Managers are yet to devise a system to address any difference of opinion between the two fostering panels on applicants' suitability.

Foster carers receive exemplary support. They identify this as a clear strength of the agency. Foster carers' training and development activities are wide ranging and effective in meeting the needs of children. For example, prospective foster carers are required to complete key training before appearing at fostering panel. Foster carers' reviews take place each year, or more frequently if there are significant changes to the household or concerns. However, foster carers' annual review documents and foster care agreements are not consistently explicit about the age range of children foster carers are permitted to care for.

One foster carer said, 'Shining Stars? The agency is the shining star! Managers are visible and available, and supervising social workers are fantastic. I couldn't ask for anything more.' However, some foster carers say they would like the agency to review foster carers' allowances and financial increments and incentives.

Managers' and staff's communication with other professionals is consistent and effective. A local authority social worker said, 'My young person is safe and settled in the placement. He reports to be treated as part of the family and has requested to remain under staying put arrangements post 18 years. The agency keeps me informed regularly and the supervising social worker advocates for the young person in all aspects of his care. The foster carer is a dedicated foster carer, she drops everything when it comes to supporting [name of child]. He is attached to his foster carer, which is positive as he feels secure and settled.'

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the management of the service ensures all staff's work and all fostering activity is consistent with the 2011 Regulations and national minimum standards and with the service's policies and procedures. This relates to Form F assessments, foster carers' annual review documents and foster care agreements being explicit about the age range of children foster carers are permitted to care for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.3)
- The registered person should ensure that allowances and any fees paid are reviewed annually and the fostering service consults with foster carers in advance of any change to the allowances and fees. This relates to the provider consulting with foster carers about the agency's allowances and fees. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 28.3)
- The registered person should ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This relates to managers establishing a process to address any difference of opinion between the fostering panel and the youth fostering panel with regard to the suitability of foster carers. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the views of the child's family are sought. This relates to staff consistently obtaining feedback from parents in parent and child placements as a feature of foster carers' annual reviews. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 1.4)

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: 1224685

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Inspector

Sandra Jacobs-Walls, Social Care Inspector

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