

Synergy Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Synergy Fostering limited is a privately owned independent fostering agency based in Rotherhithe, South London. The service has been in operation since 2004. The fostering service specialises in providing the following types of foster care: long term, short term, bridging, respite and emergency. They also offer pre-adoption placements, remand and parent and child placements.

The agency's statement of purpose identifies one of the service's key aim as providing 'careful matching of foster parents and looked after children to provide the maximum opportunity for stability and child development in placements.'

At the time of the inspection, the fostering service had 35 approved fostering households with 40 children and young people in placement. A small number of formerly looked after children aged 18+ remain living with their carers under the agency's Staying Put scheme.

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: **Good**

The service provides good quality care. Outcomes for children and young people are very positive. Children and young people develop secure attachments with their foster families and have a very strong sense of belonging. They develop good self-esteem and self-confidence. Looked after children receive personalised care that meets their individual needs and they are cared for safely. The service pays good attention to issues of equality and diversity.

Children lead healthy lifestyles and their foster carers and staff protect them from harm, neglect and abuse. Safeguarding practice is at the heart of this fostering agency. There are clear systems, policies and procedures in place to ensure that children and young people are kept safe.

The service negotiates and maintains very successful foster care placements. Unplanned endings are rare and as a result, young people thrive in safe, stable placements, many of which last for several years. The relationship between looked after children and their foster carers is nurturing and positive.

The service promotes well the educational achievement of young people; some older young people attend university. Young people have access to a range of leisure and recreational activities that they enjoy.

The fostering service encourages young people to be involved in making decisions about their lives and the service makes fair attempts to consult them effectively. Young people have good opportunities to have safe contact with their parents, siblings and significant others, when it is in their best interest to do so. Foster carers support older young people well to develop key practical skills that promote their independence in preparation for adulthood.

The fostering agency provides good support, training and supervision to foster carers. They feel valued and appreciate the investment the agency has made in them to promote positive outcomes for children and young people.

The leadership and management of the fostering agency is strong. Managers are passionate and committed to promoting the best possible outcomes for children the service cares for. The Registered Manager and Responsible Individual are both qualified social workers with extensive experience in the field of child protection and fostering amongst others. The fostering service provides all interested parties with detailed information about the service and facilities provided, Managers ensure that all key policies are in place; safeguarding policies and procedures in particular, are clear and comprehensive. Leaders and managers have vision and ambition for the service to assist the agency's continual improvement.

This inspection notes some areas for improvement. These include the increased involvement of young people in shaping the service, the more robust recording and management of complaints and for the central list to include a representative of child health. Parent and child risk assessments are not reflective of risks posed to vulnerable adults; staff vetting procedures are not sufficiently robust and managers do not maintain regulation 35 reports as required.

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 with the given

timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Must ensure that all person’s employed by them, including panel members receive appropriate appraisal (Regulation 21 (4)(a))	02/05/2016
Must ensure there are full and satisfactory information available in relation to persons working for the purposes of the fostering service in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. In particular, that two written references are obtained for panel members (Regulation 20(3))	02/05/2016
Must maintain a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals and provide the chief inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted (Regulation 35(1)(a)&(2))	02/05/2016

Recommendations

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

- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in developing the fostering service. (NMS 1.7)
- Ensure that complainants receive prompt feedback on any concerns or complaints raised and are kept informed of progress. (NMS 1.6)
- Consider appointing a representative of child health to the fostering panel to ensure the panel is equipped to make competent recommendations, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. (NMS 14.8)
- Ensure that investigations into allegations are handled fairly and consistently, in supporting the person who is subject of the allegation. (NMS 22.9)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children receive personalised care that meet their individual needs. They feel safe with their foster carers and share a true sense of belonging. They engage well not only with their foster carers but with foster carers' immediate and extended family members as well. One young person says of her placement, 'I am the happiest I have been in a long time and I like it that way.' The fostering service's matching process is sound and children experience strong attachments. As a result, placements are sustained and successful. Unplanned endings are rare and many placements have continued successfully for several years.

Placement starts are carefully co-ordinated. Young people receive good information about the service, as child-friendly information is available via two children's guides. Children and young people clearly develop a strong sense of belonging with their foster families; they routinely enjoy family holidays and special occasions. One young person told the inspector, 'I went to a family wedding a few months ago. I really enjoyed it, they don't let me feel like an outsider.' Another young person said 'I got no advice from my own parents; my (foster) family are so much more attentive.'

Children and young people live in a healthy environment with good promotion of their physical, emotional and social well-being. They have excellent access to primary health care services and receive advice and support from specialist services where this is required, for example to manage health issues such as diabetes. Staff's documented health plans ensure that young people gain the advice, support and treatment they need.

Young people engage in a range of physical and social activities that are of their choosing. These typically include sport, attendance at local youth clubs, cadets, scouts and guides and family holidays. They also enjoy a number of activities organised and facilitated by the fostering service. These activities assist young people to enjoy a healthy lifestyle and good opportunities for play. Young people enjoy well-balanced nutritious diets, which meet their cultural and religious needs.

The fostering service promotes young people's educational achievements. Young people attend school regularly and are making good educational progress from their original starting points. Children and young people make positive progress due to their foster carers' keen interest in meeting their learning needs. Young people benefit academically from the input of their foster carers and staff of the service. For some, their learning outcomes are excellent, with a number of young people achieving university entry.

Young people are able to express their views through statutory review meetings, foster carers' reviews, through their own social workers and the supervising social worker. However, the agency has not yet implemented firm arrangements for capturing children and young people's views or opinions to influence or improve the services provided to them in foster care. This is important to ensure that service

development takes into account users' expertise and experiences to help shape the future of the service.

The fostering service receives few complaints. Young people receive clear information about making complaints. Despite very clear complaints policies and procedures, staff do not consistently manage complaints in accordance with agency guidance. The recording of complaint information, action taken and ensuring in every instance issues are resolved requires improvement.

The preparation of older young people for adulthood is good. They benefit from the input of their foster carers and the fostering services staff. This input helps prepare them to manage their lives more independently. Young people have the opportunity to explore and develop skills focussed on healthy eating, budgeting, household chores and their own self-care. The fostering service has clear 'Staying Put' policies to support former looked after children remain in their existing placements if they so wish.

The fostering service meets well young people's identity needs. Staff explore issues of equality and diversity and ensure placements support any identity needs. Young people therefore, have increased self-confidence and self-esteem. For example, the agency's matching protocols and practice carefully consider: age, gender, race, disability, geographical location and linguistic needs. Foster carers support young people to attend places of worship if they so wish.

The fostering service supports children and young people's contact with their parents, brothers and sisters and other significant others where this is safe and in their best interest. Staff and foster carers handle any issues arising from contact sensitively, enabling young people to develop emotional resilience, knowledge and understanding of their background.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Managers and leaders of the fostering agency are committed to the recruitment of high quality foster carers in order to meet the needs of local authorities. The fostering service's preparation, support and training of foster carers is highly effective. This ensures that prospective and approved foster carers have good insight into the needs of those they look after and are skilled in meeting identified needs. Staff's assessments of prospective foster carers is thorough and comprehensive. Assessments contain well-triangulated, evidence-based information and they demonstrate how applicants meet the required competencies.

Foster carers are aware of their role and that of staff of the agency and local authority representatives. They work effectively as part of a professional team to explore and meet the needs of looked after children while in placement. The quality of care offered is good and placements are largely stable and successful.

The fostering service provides effective training that covers a wide range of fostering issues. This is a clear strength of the service. A foster carer comments, 'Training is 100% effective. I use it constantly and don't even realise. It actually works.' All prospective foster carers complete the 'Skills to Foster' training event. Upon approval, they undergo induction. Training thereafter is wide in scope to support the skills and practice of foster carers. Typically, core training includes safeguarding and protection, trauma, separation and loss, allegations and complaints, first aid and preparing children for independence.

The service also offers specialist training to foster carers. Issues include: child sexual exploitation, parent and child (placement) training, eating disorders and communicating with children and young people. Since the last inspection, the service has developed a comprehensive online training programme, which helps to provide training to foster carers who are unable to attend regular face-to-face training. The vast majority of the service's foster carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards within a 12-month period.

In the last year, the fostering agency has had a strong focus and provided to most of its foster carers Therapeutic Crisis Intervention in Fostering (TCIF). The programme is a 20-day course that offers practical strategies for dealing with young people who present with challenging behaviour to prevent and de-escalate potential crisis.

The training defines a crisis as an opportunity for the child to learn new coping skills and supports carers to examine the effect of trauma on children and develop foster carers awareness of self in managing difficult situations. The programme has been highly successful in supporting foster carers to reflect on how they present and actions they take to better understand and manage difficult and challenging behaviour. Consequently, children and young people are able to remain in placements that are challenging and often volatile, as foster carers are better equipped to care safely for them. Placements are stable and safe. Foster carers indicate that this training has had a significant impact not only in developing their skills as carers, but for some had a positive effect on their personal outlook. A foster carer comments, 'The TCIF training has helped me personally, with my own life and has actually made me a better person.'

The fostering service's support of foster carers is excellent. This is another key strength of the service. Staff at all levels, from students to agency directors, are approachable and readily available to offer support and advice. Supervisory visits are regular and meaningful and support group meetings are in place. A foster carer comments, 'My supervising social worker is absolutely brilliant, I can't fault her.' Another foster carer said of the staff team, 'They're there for me, very helpful, all the time.' All foster carers receive the agency's foster carer handbook, which contains comprehensive information, guidance, policies and procedures pertinent to the fostering task.

The fostering service's out of hours service responds effectively in supporting foster carers manage emergencies. A foster carer told the inspector, 'I rang when my young person went missing. They were happy to hear from me. They stayed on the

phone for a long time – as long as I needed them to.'

The annual reviews of foster carers are effective. An experienced, independent social worker manages this process robustly and efficiently. The current Independent Reviewing Officer has held the post for a significant number of years and offers the service an impartial, professional assessment ensuring panel have full information to enable them to assess the continued suitability of approved foster carers.

The fostering panel is well managed with strong leadership via the chairperson. The panel operates effectively and the service benefits by having its members drawn from a diverse range of professional backgrounds. This inspection notes, however, that the service is yet to appoint a representative from child health. This is particularly important when considering the continued approval of foster carers where the placement features issues of ill health. The administration of panel meetings is efficient and there are clear written procedures in place that support practice. The service provides panel members with training opportunities. Not all panel members, however, receive annual appraisals.

Foster carers and staff of the fostering team work in effective collaboration with external professionals. This is important to establish placement objectives and determine collectively how best to meet children and young people's needs. Social workers from placing authorities are positive about the care provided and indicate they are satisfied with the level of communication and partnership working between managers and staff of the fostering service and their local authority.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The fostering services staff team and foster carers ensure that the safety and well-being of children and young people is paramount at all levels, throughout the organisation. The fostering service ensures that foster carers are aware of the vulnerabilities of children and young people they care for. Foster carers have good insight into the underlying causes of risky and challenging behaviours they sometimes exhibit. Foster carers' understanding about the presentation of poor or challenging behaviour is enhanced by the specialist training mentioned elsewhere in this report.

The assessment, preparation and supervision of foster carers is very good and emphasises the protection of children and young people. Foster carers are familiar with key policies and procedures to support their safe care of looked after children. For example, foster carers are able to illustrate the action required in the event of a child or young person going missing from their care. There are few instances of young people being involved in, or suspicion of involvement in child sexual exploitation. Where this is the case, staff manage issues sensitively and in line with relevant guidance.

All staff and foster carers receive extensive training that helps keep children and young people safer. This includes training in; behaviour management, attachment, safeguarding, trauma and safe care. Foster carers' skills and knowledge in this area of their work is supplemented by guidance available in the electronic foster carer handbook.

Foster carers have immediate access to advice and information about responding to disclosures and safeguarding concerns. Staff and managers appropriately manage enquiries of a child protection nature and allegations made against foster carers. The service must ensure however, that in each case, foster carers subject to allegation receive appropriate support, which staff clearly document. The inspection found this to be in question for one case reviewed.

Children and young people are safer as a result of the fostering service's clear recruitment and vetting practices. The service has procedures in place that ensure the careful selection and vetting of staff, foster carers, students and members of the fostering panel. The personnel files of individuals working for the service evidence vetting information, including DBS and confirmation of formal qualifications. Not all personnel files reviewed, evidence the required two written references. This is important to confirm individuals' suitability to work with vulnerable children and young people.

Foster carers provide nurturing, stable and safe environments, Staff supervisory visits provide an opportunity for foster carers to discuss the individual progress each young person is making and to raise any safeguarding issues or concerns. During these visits, staff routinely speak with looked after children privately about their placement and any concerns they may have. Each household has a safe caring policy and risk assessment summary in place. The risk assessments for child and parent placements requires revision to ensure they account for potential risk posed to and from adults in placement. Staff conduct at least one unannounced home visit each year. These practices further promote the protection of children and young people.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Leaders of the service are ambitious and strive for continual improvement; many aspects of the fostering service's leadership and management are sound. An experienced, qualified registered manager in post receives support from the responsible individual and one other director. The responsible individual is also an experienced, qualified social worker and is the agency's decision maker. The service has a clear business plan in place to support the service's continued improvement, in particular in providing highly specialist training to foster carers.

The service has good monitoring systems in place, including a new tracking mechanism to help chart and review the progress made by children and young people. Where staff consider progress not to be satisfactory, managers and staff take prompt remedial action. A staff member comments, 'We care, we put the needs of

children first. A lot of what we do here is different; we go beyond our remit to meet the needs of children.'

The service produces an annual review report of the services function and operation, but does not maintain, and was unable to produce, quality assurance reports as required. This is in breach of regulation 35 of the Fostering Services Regulations, which requires providers to monitor and report upon matters set out in Schedule 6.

The statement of purpose is a clear and comprehensive document that outlines well the aims and objectives of the service, its ethos and services provided. The two children's guides are creative, easy-read summaries of services offered and provides a sense of what children and young people can expect.

Staff are appropriately qualified and like their managers, are extremely committed to providing good, consistent support to children, young people and their fostering families. Staff receive excellent support and supervision and there are good training opportunities available. Managers complete annual staff appraisals and the agency ethos is to reflect on and learn from practice. One staff member told the inspector, "What keeps me here? Brilliant managers and working directly with young people. It's very professional and I'm involved in building the organisation. I'm not just a worker, but am included in what goes on in the background. I love fostering. Support and supervision is really good, regular. I sometimes spend a long time in supervision. It's open and provides me with good advice. My manager knows the carers really very well and that helps."

The two social work students on student placement with the fostering service at the time of the inspection share this view about managers' support of staff. One student says, 'Managers here really do listen. They are committed to all the young people and foster carers. They are responsive to individuals and developing systems. Staff are respectful to everyone they meet and are ready to learn and change themselves. The social workers here are amazing.'

Directors of the organisation ensure that the fostering service is adequately resourced and financially viable. The premises and administrative systems are suitable to meet the service's aims and objectives. The ongoing development of IT systems and the continued focus on foster carer training is illustrative of the service's capacity to invest and develop while continuing to offer a quality service.

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.