

Isp Whitstable

Isp

Regent Street, Whitstable, Kent CT5 1JD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

ISP is an independent fostering agency owned by the private company Partnerships in Children's Services Ltd. There are a number of other ISP branches in the south of England. ISP Whitstable was registered with Ofsted in September 2017. The agency provides long-term, short-term, emergency and parent and child placements for children referred by local authorities. The agency currently has 24 approved fostering households and is looking after 23 children.

The agency has not had a registered manager since September 2018.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 April 2019

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 16 July 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: inadequate

Enforcement action since last inspection: Following the last inspection, the agency was subject to two compliance notices. These have now been met.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- children receive a high level of individualised care from their foster carers
- children make very good progress in key areas of their development
- children's educational progress and attendance are well monitored and strongly encouraged
- matching arrangements are thoroughly completed for both full-time and respite placements
- risk assessments are comprehensively carried out and reliably reviewed
- the assessment, preparation and reviews of foster carers are thoroughly completed with a clear safeguarding focus
- a competent and experienced fostering panel and agency decision maker are in place
- the new manager has demonstrated strong monitoring and auditing skills
- the agency has demonstrated its ability to acknowledge its weaknesses and change direction positively.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Agency support and monitoring of some foster carers have been poor for some time. This has now changed, but the agency needs to demonstrate that it can sustain this.
- An allegation demonstrated that a child's views had not been listened to sufficiently. Steps have been taken to change processes so that children are routinely seen alone, but again the agency needs to demonstrate that it can sustain this practice and use it to hear children's views.
- The policy on restraint contains legislative inaccuracies.
- The practice on restraint does not ensure that appropriate and proportionate methods are being used.
- Three recommendations are made to encourage further development in the following areas: positively promoting cultural and gender identity; considering having a care-leaver on the fostering panel; and obtaining regular feedback from local authorities about the service that the agency offers.

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, 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 registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that children have opportunities to talk privately with the agency's social worker, and that their expressed views are carefully listened to and acted upon.</p>	30/05/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster carers. (Regulation 13 (1))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that the grounds for lawful restraint detailed in the agency policy are identical to those allowed by legislation.</p>	30/05/2019
<p>Ensure that 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 specifically relates to ensuring that foster carers record restraints in sufficient detail, so that the agency can be assured that the necessary restraint was proportionate and of appropriate duration.</p>	30/05/2019
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, advice, information and support as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them. (Regulation 17(1))</p> <p>This specifically relates to ensuring that no foster carers are left without regular monitoring and support visits from their agency social worker for any periods longer than is stated in the agency's own procedure.</p>	30/05/2019

Recommendations

- Ensure that children are provided with personalised care that meets their needs and promotes all aspects of their individual identity. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 2.1) This specifically relates to ensuring that expressions of cultural and gender identity are positively promoted.
- Ensure that the number, skills, knowledge and experience of persons on the central list are sufficient to enable the fostering service to constitute panels that are equipped to make competent recommendations to the fostering service provider, taking into account the nature of the children and carers that the service caters for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 14.8) This specifically relates to ensuring that consideration is given to having a care-leaver on the fostering panel.
- Ensure that there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. This includes the financial viability of the service, any serious incidents, allegations or complaints about the service and ensuring the quality of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1) This specifically relates to ensuring that the views of local authority social workers about how the agency works with them are regularly sought.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Since its inadequate judgement in July 2018, this agency has been radically overhauled. There are new processes and procedures, a new manager has been appointed and there is a completely different group of supervising social workers in place. These comprehensive changes have now resulted in some major improvements to the quality of care provided, but there are still some shortfalls that are not yet fully addressed.

However, a particular strength of this agency is the high level of individualised care that foster carers offer to the children that they are caring for. Foster carers have consistently maintained this level of care, even through the upheaval following the last inspection. This high level of care is well supported by a recently introduced comprehensive matching form, together with a clear process and clear responsibilities. Foster carers now have access to all relevant information. If there is an issue with accessing any local authority forms, the agency now has a sound escalation policy in place.

This careful pre-planning results in the vast majority of children placing their trust in their carers, and clearly gaining a sense of security from this relationship. Carers protect and strongly promote the welfare of their children. This positive focus on their core needs enables children to relax and make progress. As a result, a wide range of children and young people are making very good progress in key areas of their lives. The numbers and range of children that this applies to represent excellent practice.

There is a dedicated educational resource that provides a coordinated and focused approach. All children's educational needs are individually and promptly progressed. This bespoke approach to their educational needs results in the vast majority of children regularly attending school or college. For some children, this represents a major improvement to their previous experiences.

In addition, children also make good progress in their emotional health and well-being. For example, some children are less aggressive, their behaviour is generally less volatile, and they are beginning to regulate their own behaviour. Others now have a more usual sleep pattern, can accept comfort and affection and have learned to meet their own self-care needs. As a local authority social worker said, 'She [their child] has made incredible progress.'

Children experience many new things with their carers, such as holidays abroad and being part of clubs and sporting teams. However, their key new experience is joining in and being part of ordinary family life. As one child said, 'I like it that I have my carers who look after me and care for me and we go out and have nice times.' To help sustain the stability of these placements, all carers have an entitlement to a set period of respite care. Children's views are now considered when making these respite arrangements and a good matching form is completed prior to the first visit. Generally, children are happy with these arrangements, but on occasion plans are changed at their request. This represents good child-centred practice.

Children's views are routinely formally sought about their foster home, both at their review and by an annual questionnaire. This supplements the planned individual contact they now regularly have with their supervising social worker. In addition, there are opportunities to influence the visual direction of new initiatives such as outcome trackers. There are also well-planned and creative holiday activity days. Currently, there are limited opportunities for older teenagers to be appropriately involved in the agency's core business. For example, the fostering panel does not have representation from a recent care-leaver.

Children are well supported through transitions. One child had a particularly lengthy introduction to her foster carer, and all parties were prepared to wait until she asked to live with her carer. Again, this is strong child-centred practice. At the other end of placements, teenagers are well prepared for semi-independence and learn a variety of practical, self-care and emotional skills to help them navigate through adulthood. Successful 'staying put' arrangements are in place, and discussions about this routinely happen at a set review point.

Foster carers have not always been well supported in looking after their foster children. There was a significant period of staff upheaval around the time of the last inspection that continued for some time afterwards. This left a minority of foster carers with no supervising social worker for several weeks, or, for a smaller group, several months. It is to the considerable credit of these foster carers that they continued to offer a high standard of care to their children in the absence of appropriate agency support.

However, all foster carers are now receiving regular good-quality support. Although a small minority of foster carers feel very bruised by their experiences of the agency in the last year, most are positive and hopeful. As one foster carer said, 'It's going in the right direction now.' Another commented, 'Supervision used to be every two or three months, now it is every four weeks.'

In addition to now getting very regular and good supervision, foster carers also have access to a good range of well-monitored training courses. Carers also now have a personal development plan that identifies, for example, those requiring additional training, such as an advanced course in managing autism spectrum disorder. Some foster carers are also developing their skills further by attending an advanced foster care course. Attendance at carers' lunches has historically been poor but is now being built up by offering structured sessions with useful speakers, such as the agency's therapist. As a foster carer commented, 'These [lunches] are now more structured and more targeted to what we need.'

There has been little recruitment since the last inspection, but recruitment processes are thorough and robust. There is a strong and stable panel, which makes good recommendations to the agency decision maker (ADM). Foster carer assessments are completed thoroughly and in a timely manner, and quality assurance processes are generally good. The ADM is experienced and knowledgeable, and, together with the panel, has provided a backcloth of good, reliable practice during a period of great upheaval.

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

There are some significant improvements to safeguarding practice in place. Of particular note are the updated risk assessments, and the more thorough practice that is apparent in reviewing foster carer approvals and managing allegations. In addition, a highly experienced and knowledgeable head of safeguarding has been appointed and she has an overview of all safeguarding events. However, there are still areas that require attention, particularly restraint practice.

Risk assessments are now thorough documents that comprehensively cover all known risks to that child. They contain clear strategies to manage risk and are routinely and regularly reviewed. They are regularly audited, and any discrepancies in timeliness or content are picked up effectively by the manager. This represents a significant improvement since the last inspection. These improvements are noted both by the fostering panel and by staff who have been at the agency for a long time. A panel representative said, 'The risk assessments that were presented for foster carer reapprovals were sometimes not dated or of good quality. That is not the case now.' A member of staff commented, 'Now we do risk assessments before they go out of date and not after.'

The agency has sound, personalised risk assessments with regards to managing situations where children may go missing. Currently, there are no children who routinely go missing, but on the isolated occasions that this happens, foster carers have followed the agency's procedures appropriately. Some children are clearly becoming increasingly safe. For example, one teenager who used to go missing has not gone missing for nearly two years.

Children generally have strong, positive relationships with their carers and can confide in them. For example, one teenager talked to his foster family about an incident involving illicit drugs. Following this conversation, he has not repeated this experimentation, but the foster carers remain quietly vigilant. This trusting relationship has helped protect this teenager from further harm.

Generally, foster carers use their positive relationships to manage behaviour. They are appropriately trained in de-escalation and understand the impact of trauma on a child. However, on rare occasions physical restraint is necessary to keep a child safe. The agency policy on when restraint may be used does not accurately reflect the legal position. This poses a risk that restraint may be used in more situations than is appropriate. In addition, when restraint has been used it has not been recorded in the appropriate detail required by the agency policy. This means that the agency cannot be sure that the restraint method used was proportionate or of a reasonable duration. This does not sufficiently promote children's safety.

The assessment, preparation and reviews of approval of foster carers are done by a separate team to the one supervising foster carers. Having different teams looking at the practice of the same carers means that there is a further effective safeguarding check and balance. This team can also usefully offer a prompt independent review service in the event of serious complaints or allegations, and is quite prepared to criticise the agency when appropriate. This represents good, safe safeguarding practice.

Allegations are investigated very robustly and thoroughly. Foster carers and staff have all been trained in how to respond to allegations, and a useful mini aide-memoire has been prepared. However, the outcome of one allegation showed that a child's concerns about his placement were insufficiently considered. As a result of this, practice has significantly changed. This has been an appropriate response, but clearly the child's views should have been taken more seriously.

Some further safeguarding improvements have been made since the last inspection. For example, prospective foster carers must now complete an additional layer of safeguarding training before approval, and training in radicalisation now includes the possibility of children being groomed by far-right extremists. These are positive improvements. Staff recruitment practice in the agency continues to be thoroughly completed and safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The acting manager has been in post since December 2018 and has applied to Ofsted to become registered. Colleagues describe her as 'a breath of fresh air'. She has brought robust, proactive (rather than reactive) processes into the agency, such as a clear timetable for unannounced visits to foster carers. Supervising social workers now work with daily, weekly and monthly 'tick sheets'. These are monitored and ensure that no important tasks are overlooked.

This agency has learned some important lessons, particularly from the outcomes of complaints and allegations. Seeing and listening to children on their own are now routine expectations of supervising social workers. This is particularly important as, although the small number of staff who have worked in the agency for some time know the children very well, most staff and the manager are new to the agency. Quite rightly, the manager is prioritising visiting all carers and children in their homes. She is making good progress on this and is already a familiar face at carers' lunches and children's activity days.

Children's educational progress and achievements are regularly monitored and shared with the manager, and provide her with good overview of their general progress. All children whose placements are at high risk of disruption are routinely discussed at a cross-remit group. This offers useful opportunities to share strategies. Children's outcomes trackers have recently been revamped, and now offer a more nuanced approach to tracking their overall progress.

The manager's auditing is strong and comprehensively covers all appropriate areas. This auditing is further checked at her supervision, which is thorough and happens at monthly intervals. In turn, the manager offers robust but supportive supervision to her staff. A supervising social worker commented, 'She is experienced and calm. I can discuss anything with her. She has a clear structure and helps it all make sense.' In addition, staff clearly benefit from the newly introduced focused weekly meeting that enables all staff to be aware of any pressure points across the agency's children and foster families.

Generally, children's cultural, religious and identity needs are soundly met. Foster carers are usually appropriately sensitive to children's needs and aspirations and will

strive to meet these. However, agency workers do not always support foster carers in promoting personalised and creative approaches to cultural and identity needs.

Following the last inspection there were significant staffing shortfalls, including no manager in post. A locally-based registered manager, together with the registered individual, took on the task of radically overhauling this agency, including recruiting new staff and ensuring that compliance notices were met. It is clear that huge efforts have gone into this task and, overall, good outcomes have been achieved in a relatively short space of time. However, not all foster carers received appropriate oversight and support during this period. This did not promote children's welfare effectively, or provide some foster carers with effective supervision.

During this period of upheaval, effective links were not maintained with some local authorities. As one said, 'Previously, communication with the agency was not good; we didn't know who'd left or who to talk to.' This contrasts with the current position, and they went on to say, 'Recently it is much better; the current supervising social worker is brilliant.'

There are now sufficient, competent staff in post, with clear plans to increase staff numbers as carer numbers increase. Foster carers reliably receive four-weekly recorded supervision, timely appropriate training and at least one unannounced visit annually. Comprehensive annual reviews of approval are in place. An updated statement of purpose is in place and the agency is well placed to continue its improvement journey.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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: 1256561

Registered provider: Isp

Registered provider address: Partnerships in Children's Services Ltd, Wavendon Tower, Wavendon Business Park, Ortensia Drive, Milton Keynes MK17 8LX

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Inspector

Bridget Goddard, social care inspector



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