

Asphaleia Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector Stephen Collett
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Date of last inspection 10/12/2012

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Asphaleia Limited is a private fostering agency which registered in August 2004. There are 23 approved foster places in 12 fostering households. Long and short term fostering services are provided.

Children and young people are able to access a range of other support services delivered by the organisation.

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**

Recent changes in the leadership and management structure of the agency, some of which have been unavoidable, have presented many challenges in recent months. Management cover arrangements have been in place and a new permanent manager is now in post, although she had not been registered with Ofsted at the time of this inspection.

This disruptive period has had a negative impact on the agency and the overall effectiveness of the fostering service has declined. While children and young people continue to have their needs met in good quality placements, there have been shortfalls in safeguarding processes which could have compromised their safety.

The number of carers has remained fairly static since the last inspection in December 2012, with new carers being recruited as others leave. These are recruited from a

diverse range of backgrounds, enabling the agency to offer foster placements to meet a variety of needs. Foster carers receive good preparation prior to caring for children and young people and their ongoing training and support needs are generally well catered for. However, communication between the agency and carers has led to occasional misunderstandings and many carers have identified the need for additional support to ensure their emotional well-being.

Foster carer assessments are completed by agency staff and occasionally external consultants. These are generally of good quality, providing detailed analysis of the potential foster carer's skills and motivation. Assessment reports are rigorously scrutinised by the fostering panel, thereby ensuring that all relevant information is obtained prior to recommendations being made.

Foster carers play an active role in planning suitable care for children and young people. They communicate effectively with social workers and other professionals, ensuring young people receive continuity of care in most cases.

Leaders and managers recognise the importance of building relationships with partner organisations. Consultation with some professionals has not always taken place in a timely manner. The new manager is taking steps to ensure professional relationships with partner agencies are more productive.

The ethos and values of the organisation are understood and embraced by the foster carers. This ensures young people are listened to, and their wishes and feelings are respected. Leaders, managers and staff demonstrate a commitment to engaging children and young people in the future development and direction of the agency.

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
The fostering service provider must ensure the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider (Regulation 12 (3) (b))	18/12/2015
The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them; specifically, ensure training needs identified through disciplinary procedures are met (Regulation 17 (1))	22/01/2016
The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such	18/12/2015

<p>information as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child; specifically, ensure foster carers receive written copies of risk assessments designed to keep young people safe (Regulation 17 (3))</p>	
<p>If any of the events listed in column 1 of 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))</p>	<p>18/12/2015</p>

Recommendations

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

Ensure any equipment needed for the appropriate care of the children is provided to foster carers (NMS 6.12)

Ensure all foster carers have access to adequate social work and other professional support, information and advice, to enable them to provide consistent, high quality care to the child; specifically, consider offering counselling support to those carers who would benefit from this service (NMS 21.6)

Ensure that allegations against members of the fostering household are reported by the fostering service to the LADO; specifically, ensure the LADO is promptly informed of all disciplinary matters relating to foster carers (NMS 22.6)

Ensure a written record is kept by the fostering service detailing the time, date and length of each supervision held for each member of staff, including the registered person. The record is signed by the supervisor and the member of staff at the end of the supervision (NMS 24.5)

Ensure there are clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service; specifically, ensure effective monitoring of the actions taken in response to child protection allegations (NMS 25.1)

Ensure there is a system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping and take action when needed; specifically, ensure records are kept of decision making processes, particularly in relation to matching arrangements (NMS 26.2)

Ensure foster carers understand the nature and level of support which will be provided to them by the fostering service; specifically, ensure effective communication is maintained between the fostering agency staff and foster carers (NMS 21.2)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people are looked after well by their foster carers. This contributes to them forming positive attachments in most cases. A foster carer was observed to be vigilant and attentive to the needs of a small child, ensuring that she was kept safe around the house and stimulated through play and conversation. Another young person, in a questionnaire about the quality of care received, stated that her carers are good at trying to keep her safe.

While carers make every effort to ensure they deliver good quality care, there has been an occasion when the task was compromised as a result of the agency being unclear about financial support to purchase necessary equipment. One carer was under the impression that she had to purchase items such as a push chair, from the clothing allowance. This led to second hand clothes being purchased for a young child placed at short notice, and the carers buying other used baby equipment, with no guarantee that it was safe or serviceable.

Children and young people are able to access a good range of support services. A strength of the agency is that looked after children can be supported through other projects delivered by the organisation. This includes individual support to improve emotional well-being and build self-esteem. Older young people can also access a range of individualised learning programmes. This is particularly beneficial for young people who have struggled with mainstream educational provision.

Other children and young people have made significant progress within mainstream school. Some carers have advocated strongly for children to be given places in local schools and subsequently built effective working relationships with teaching staff. This has ensured children and young people receive good support to overcome past negative experiences in school and benefit from a consistent approach when presenting challenging behaviour.

The agency demonstrates a commitment to listening to, and acting on, children and young people's wishes and feelings when appropriate. These values are understood and adopted by foster carers. Children and young people are provided with information on how to access an advocacy service to support them in expressing their views. Children and young people are encouraged to participate in the development of the agency by getting involved in initiatives such as 'take over day', initiated by the office of the children's commissioner.

Children and young people who remain in placement with their carers on a long term basis begin to address some of their negative and unsafe behaviours. This is not always the case for those placed short term whilst further planning takes place, particularly if they are asylum seeking young people struggling to adapt to new cultural expectations. However, the agency takes a pro-active role in ensuring these young people move onto appropriate placements which can meet their needs and

support them into adult life.

Foster carers encourage young people to adopt a healthy life-style and provide them with guidance and support where necessary. Carers are familiar with the risks associated with unsafe behaviours, and help young people to access specialist help, such as that delivered by sexual health professionals. Some carers have been particularly effective in ensuring children have their complex health and education needs thoroughly assessed.

Children and young people benefit from having well planned contact with their families where appropriate. Carers are familiar with these plans and prepare children for these visits, taking into account the likely emotional impact on them. Carers maintain positive relationships with parents where it is appropriate to do so. They feel well supported by the agency in resolving any difficulties that arise as a result of contact arrangements.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Good**

The agency has a good record of recruiting a diverse group of carers from a range of backgrounds. This has been achieved despite the agency operating in an area with a predominantly white British population. It also compliments the agencies recognised expertise in supporting asylum seeking children and young people by increasing levels of cultural awareness throughout the service.

Foster carers spoken to during the inspection were unanimous in their praise for the assessment and preparation phase of their fostering career. Carers felt well supported during their induction and benefitted from relevant training. This includes training focused on meeting the needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people.

Children and young people were observed to be relaxed and at ease with their foster carers. Carers have the skills to make children and young people feel part of their family. They engage them in day-to-day routines and planning for special events and leisure activities.

The agency has occasionally struggled to provide carers with respite care, at times when this would have increased the overall stability of the placement. However, the agency is working in partnership with placing authorities to overcome this difficulty. Most carers are confident that the agency does all it can to ensure consistent and reliable arrangements are established.

Carers feel well supported by their supervising social worker, and say they benefit from regular supervision which focuses on the needs of children and young people in placement and the impact on family life. One carer specifically mentioned work undertaken with her own children to provide them with a better understanding of the

behaviours demonstrated by a fostered child. Carers develop skills to effectively communicate with social workers and other professionals ensuring the child's needs are clearly understood by all those involved in the care for the child.

Some carers feel that communication with the agency could be improved, expressing the view that they are not always provided with information in a timely manner. Many attribute this to the recent challenges facing the management team, referred to in the leadership and management section of this report, and are confident that this will be resolved as the new management arrangements become embedded. There is a consistent view among foster carers that access to a counselling service would enable them to address their own emotional well-being, particularly following incidents of extreme challenging behaviour. Some carers feel that supporting highly traumatised asylum seeking young people can have a negative impact on their own mental health and feel the good support offered by their supervising social worker would be enhanced by access to professional counselling.

Members of the fostering panel offer a wide range of expertise and specialist knowledge. Prompt action is taken to ensure new members are recruited following resignations. An experienced panel chair ensures rigorous scrutiny of assessment reports and annual foster carer reviews. This ensures that the personal and professional development of foster carers is prioritised and their particular skills recognised. Consequently, children and young people are generally placed with carers who have the right skills to meet their needs.

The agency communicates effectively with placing authorities, and consistently seeks as much information as possible when children and young people are referred. The matching process is undertaken by the manager and supervising social worker, who will often seek the advice of other professionals within the agency. Consultation also takes place with social workers of children and young people already in placement so that the impact of a new admission can be assessed. Although good assessments are taking place in relation to matching, no records are currently kept of the decision making process.

Effective partnership working ensures the agency and carers provide care which reflects the local authority care plan. Staff and carers engage well in children and young people's statutory reviews and are involved in the care planning process. When concerns emerge about a young person's well-being, staff and carers take a pro-active role in devising appropriate strategies and contributing towards local authority planning processes. For example addressing the concerns for a young person who went missing frequently.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The particular vulnerabilities and associated risks pertaining to each child and young

person are well known to the agency and foster carers. All children and young people have a safe care plan and have specific risk assessments where known behaviours make them particularly vulnerable. However, the risk assessments and safe care plans are not always updated following a significant incident, such as violence displayed towards the carer. In one case, a foster carer had not been given a copy of the risk assessment relating to a young person's susceptibility to being sexually exploited. Despite this, discussion had taken place with the foster carers on appropriate strategies for supporting the young person.

Carers are familiar with the actions they need to take if a child or young person goes missing and follow the agreed local agency and police protocol. This ensures that young people who place themselves at significant risk of harm when missing are brought to the attention of specialist external support workers.

Procedures for reporting child protection concerns to the local authority child protection team are not robust. This is partly because not all written guidance to carers explicitly states they must telephone the agency should they become aware of a child protection issue. In addition, on one occasion, agency social workers demonstrated an over-reliance on a parent's stated intention to report a concern and only reported the matter days later by way of submitting an incident report by email.

Children and young people say they feel safe in their placements. One young person in a parent and baby placement stated that she felt secure and had learnt how to care for and protect her child as a result of the guidance given by the carer. Children and young people are given information on how to complain and state that they would use the procedure if necessary.

The agency is taking steps to develop positive working relationships with external agencies and enhance the protection and safety of children and young people. However, this has not consistently been the case and consultation has not always taken place with local authority designated officer (LADO) when concerns about foster carers have arisen. To address this the manager has recently contacted the LADO to introduce herself and initiate a dialogue and better consultation.

Some carers build excellent working relationships with schools, particularly where the behaviour of the child places them at risk of coming to harm.

Foster carers receive a thorough induction and ongoing training which prepares them well for keeping children and young people safe. Staff and panel member recruitment is robust, although some minor shortfalls were identified in the recording of these procedures. However, these did not result in children and young people's safety being compromised.

Although the agency panel does not have a formal role in monitoring safeguarding practice it does maintain an oversight over particular issues which could compromise a child or young person's safety. For example, investigations into the conduct of foster carers are kept under review to establish whether there are any negative implications relating to the welfare of the child.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

There has been inconsistent management of the agency over the last year which has had a negative impact on overall performance and stability for staff and some carers. Much of this has been beyond the control of leaders and managers as it resulted from the sudden unexpected passing of the Registered Individual.

Following the departure of the Registered Manager in August 2014 temporary management arrangements were implemented. An experienced member of staff, who was on maternity leave at the time, was identified as the replacement Registered Manager. She returned to work in March 2015 and took on the role of trainee manager. A comprehensive action and development plan prepared her to take up the manager's position in June 2015. She subsequently applied to Ofsted to become registered but administrative delays resulted in the application not being processed by the time of this inspection.

The manager is currently undertaking the Level 5 Diploma in Leadership and Management qualification.

A manager from the agency has been identified to take on the role of Registered Individual. At the time of this inspection an application for registration had been made.

The manager receives good support, particularly from the managing director, in developing her managerial skills. She has a detailed development plan, focused on enhancing her knowledge and skills to manage the service effectively. She receives regular supervision but is not always provided with signed copies of the notes taken. Arrangements are being made for her to receive external practice based supervision from a consultant practitioner.

The manager maintains positive working relationships with placing authorities. One Social Worker reported that he would not hesitate to make referrals to the agency in future. Leaders and managers have a thorough understanding of the needs of the local looked after children population based on research and analysis undertaken within the agency.

The agency has established systems for monitoring the quality of care being delivered and these are kept under review. Despite this level of scrutiny leaders and managers have not consistently identified weaknesses in these systems. An insufficient response to a safeguarding concern was not picked up through the management monitoring process. Managers judged the response to be appropriate when, in fact, it lacked the vigour required to ensure a young person's safety.

Staff and panel members are suitably qualified and experienced to undertake their specific roles. Staff receive regular supervision which enables them to reflect on their practice and professional development needs. Annual appraisals are thorough and inclusive, benefitting from 360° feedback in most cases. The agency provides a comprehensive training programme for staff and carers, relevant to the needs of children and young people. This is generally well received, although some carers feel the input of external professionals would complement the programme. Managers take this into account when planning the training schedule.

A new approach to delivering training and support for foster carers has recently been introduced. 'Learning sets' provide carers with the opportunity to set the agenda and reflect on best practice. This approach enables carers to share experiences and learn from one another. Foster carers feel this is a positive development which offers new opportunities for support.

Despite this positive approach to training, one carer was not provided with the specific training he required, which was identified during a disciplinary investigation. Consequently he was not given the opportunity to address negative behaviours which could have affected the quality of care being provided to children and young people.

The statement of purpose is regularly reviewed and reflects the service delivered by the agency. This ensures placing authorities, parents and carers are familiar with the aims and objectives of the fostering provision. Similarly, the children and young people's guide is kept under review and updated when necessary. As a result, children and young people are provided with information on how they will be cared for and how they can resolve any concerns.

Recommendations made at the last inspection in December 2012, have been acted upon and the fostering panel now has access to legal advice when necessary. Management are currently exploring ways of formalising these arrangements. Panel members are also able to attend joint training days with staff. Most panel members have not benefitted from engaging in planned training sessions following panel meetings due to other commitments. This has been recognised by leaders and managers and is being addressed.

Since the last inspection, the agency has not notified Ofsted of any significant events. However, some events and incidents have occurred which warranted Ofsted being informed. Notably this relates to the agency caring for young people who have been identified as being at high risk of child sexual exploitation.

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.