

## Blue Sky Fostering

Broadwater House, Broadwater Road, Romsey, Hampshire SO51 8GT

# Assurance visit

## Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency is privately owned and operated. It currently provides in excess of 270 fostering placements for children and young people across the south of England, in short-term, long-term, parent and child, emergency, disabled children, bridging and pre-adoption placements.

In addition, the agency offers a therapeutically led care service through some of its carers. This provides placements for children who have suffered emotional abuse or trauma, or who have behavioural issues. The agency also provides direct work with families, which aims to help some children to return to live with them.

**Visit dates:** 18 to 19 February 2021

**Previous inspection date:** 23 October 2017

**Previous inspection judgement:** Outstanding

## Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits. This visit was conducted remotely.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

### The care of children

Most children placed by this agency build strong and secure relationships with their foster carers. The foster carers spoken to during this visit demonstrated a commitment to implementing the agency's 'therapeutically led care' (TLC) model. This supports children to develop a sense of belonging and begin to address past traumas.

The physical and mental health needs of children are prioritised. Foster carers have demonstrated a strong commitment to meeting the needs of the children whom they care for. In one case the foster carers moved home so they could more effectively support a child with physical disabilities. Foster carers undertake specific training so that they can care for children with complex health needs.

The agency's therapeutic team supports foster carers to understand behaviours associated with childhood trauma and subsequently implement effective strategies for managing challenging situations. Additional support is provided by Individual Workers who befriend the child and work alongside the foster carers to strengthen potentially unstable placements. For example, one Individual Worker supported a child to complete an 'emotions journal', which enabled the child to explore their feelings in a safe environment.

The agency has a designated specialist education team who takes an active role in securing appropriate education provision for children who may struggle at school. Some children who have previously refused school are now making significant progress. One child who recently experienced significant challenges has been able to remain focused in education. This child's success can be partly attributed to the care and support given by the foster carers.

The agency's participation manager has played a central role in supporting children, and their foster carers, to manage the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 national lockdown restrictions. Outdoor activities were arranged over the summer holidays, and creative home-based events, such as family quizzes and weekly 'bake offs', were organised as more restrictive lockdown measures were introduced.

The participation manager has also facilitated the sharing of child-friendly advice regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and government advice and resources relating to children's education.

## **The safety of children**

There are highly effective systems in place for assessing and managing the risks associated with children and young people's vulnerabilities. Children's safe care plans and risk assessments are personalised and contain clear strategies for mitigating against risk. This empowers foster carers to respond in a timely and effective way when children may be at risk of significant harm.

This good practice is also evident in the risk assessments applicable to keeping staff, foster carers and children safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is clear guidance, based on information provided by the World Health Organisation, for those undertaking face-to-face visits to families. The Participation Manager has also taken a creative approach to preparing children for visits from staff who may be wearing personal protective equipment.

Staff with specialist knowledge support foster carers to manage complex safeguarding issues. For example, a knowledgeable member of staff motivated relatively inexperienced foster carers to increase their understanding of child sexual exploitation and to undertake their own research on the subject. Consequently, the foster carers were better prepared when they began caring for a particularly vulnerable young person.

Foster carers take appropriate action when children go missing from their foster homes. This can be partly attributed to the clear policies and guidance underpinning practice. Foster carers have been proactive in locating missing children and welcoming them back home in a sensitive and caring manner when they are found. Managers and staff take steps to ensure that timely independent return home interviews are conducted in order to gain a greater understanding of the issues contributing to the child's missing episodes.

The supervision of staff and foster carers places strong emphasis on keeping children safe. This includes providing opportunities to reflect on the effectiveness of behaviour management strategies. These discussions enable training and additional support needs to be quickly identified.

There is a strong culture of listening to the wishes and feelings of children and young people and, where appropriate, they are encouraged to contribute towards care planning. Consequently, one young person was able to confidently tell the inspector the impact of the boundaries that had been agreed with his foster carers.

When concerns do emerge regarding the practice of foster carers, there is effective liaison with the relevant external safeguarding professionals. When advice is given to conduct internal investigations, there is a strong professional response. Investigations are thorough and clearly identify where there is room for improvement in the practice of staff, foster carers or the agency's operating systems. Actions for improving practice are specific and relevant to the identified shortfall.

## Leaders and managers

The registered manager has good oversight of the needs and vulnerabilities of the children being looked after by the agency. She has good support from other senior managers in the organisation, and there is a collective effort to ensure that quality of care monitoring systems quickly identify any emerging areas of concern. Effective management of the service and its resources has ensured that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic children are still being visited by agency staff. Suitable measures are in place to ensure that meetings, such as looked after child reviews, are conducted remotely.

Foster carers feel very well supported. All those spoken to, and those who provided written feedback during this visit, were unanimous in their praise for the agency. The out-of-hours on-call system is an efficient way of ensuring that foster carers are supported to manage unforeseen circumstances. One foster carer said that the on-call system could be used just to 'sound things out' if they are unsure of how to approach a challenging situation.

There is a highly collaborative approach to ensuring that children's needs are met. There is an integrated approach from the therapy team, the Participation Manager, Individual Workers and the supervising social workers. This ensures that there is consistency in planning how a child's needs will be met. One supervising social worker feels that this is a contributory factor to staff morale being 'very high'.

Managers ensure that good-quality staff supervision takes place on a regular basis and allows time for children's needs to be reviewed and analysed. The welfare of staff is explored during supervision, and appropriate arrangements are made for those requiring additional support to ensure their ongoing professional development.

The fostering panel has continued to be an effective mechanism for scrutinising practice and promoting safe placements during the COVID-19 restrictions. Meetings have taken place remotely, but this has not diminished the quality of the panel's performance. Thorough scrutiny of standards of care investigations has ensured close monitoring of the agency's safeguarding practice.

No requirements were made following the last full inspection in October 2017. One recommendation was made in relation to recording in children's case files. This has been addressed. No requirements or recommendations are made following this assurance visit being undertaken.

## **Independent fostering agency details**

**Unique reference number:** SC064220

**Registered provider:** Blue Sky Fostering Limited

**Registered provider address:** 4 Jardine House, Harrovian Business Village,  
Bessborough Road, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 3EX

**Responsible individual:** Amanda Mills

**Registered manager:** Nicola Crisp

## **Inspectors**

Stephen Collett, Social Care Inspector

Suzy Lemmy, Social Care Inspector

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