

Sunbeam Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Sunbeam Fostering is a privately owned independent fostering agency. The agency is one of three fostering agencies registered with Ofsted. The agency provides a range of foster placements for children who are unable to live within their birth families.

The agency provides emergency, short term, bridging, respite, long term and parent and child placements. The agency is able to meet the needs of disabled children and unaccompanied children from outside the UK. The agency is also able to provide solo placements for children with very specific and complex needs who require intensive support.

This is a large fostering agency with 214 fostering households for 274 children. There are approximately 350 approved foster carers. The agency has recruited approximately 40 new foster carers over the previous year.

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: **outstanding**.

Children flourish within this agency and are making exceptional progress in all areas of their lives. There is a substantial increase in their social, emotional and educational development and achievement. Children are exceeding expectations educationally and a high proportion of young people are pursuing further education.

The agency has their own charity and there are plans to formally launch a scheme where they give financial support to young people attending university. Children benefit from an extensive range of support groups. They also have excellent 'Staying Put' arrangements, enabling them to remain with their foster carers for their early adulthood.

Children benefit from highly professional foster carers who tenaciously advocate on their behalf. Foster carers are from wide ranging ethnicities and religions. Although children may not always have a cultural match, skills matching of placements is exceptional. One of the agency's key strengths is their exceptionally high placement stability rate, with significantly lower breakdowns than the national average. There is an outstanding commitment to vocational and ongoing training for foster carers. Extensive support is available for foster carers which includes regional resource centres in Perivale, Croydon, Walthamstow, Reading and Suffolk.

Children benefit from a highly influential, effective fostering panel, which has a valued quality assurance function. The panel chair has significant experience in children's social care and provides strong leadership. The agency has an excellent recruitment strategy which is responsive to trends and local authorities' requests.

The agency has very good safeguarding arrangements. There is a national safeguarding lead person who provides expert knowledge and ensures consistent practice. Children feel safe and there are virtually no issues in relation to being missing from care. Foster carers and staff receive regular safeguarding training. Training keeps them updated on pertinent issues effecting children. This includes children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and gang affiliation. Children receive protection from the agency's recruitment practices which comply with regulations.

Children receive a service from an agency which has an excellent commitment to staff development. The organisational structure meets the optimum needs of children. All directors and the majority of senior leaders are social work qualified. The Registered Manager is a forward thinking social work professional, with approximately forty years' experience. The leadership is strengthened by highly competent team management, social worker and administration arrangements.

Children receive care from one of the highest performing independent fostering agencies in the country. There are very extensive links with virtually all of the London boroughs and significant councils in southern and eastern England. The agency volunteers for pilot schemes, is a member of significant forums and participates in central government consultations. Meticulous monitoring ensures that the agency is innovatively evolving. The comprehensive business development plan recognises the agency's key strengths and gaps. There are no recommendations and no breaches of regulations identified.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children flourish within this agency and are making exceptional progress in all areas of their lives. Placing authorities highlight that children are 'settled and thriving in foster care'. Children benefit from uniquely tailored care which purposefully meets their needs. There is considerable insight which enables children to maximise their potential and lead enriching lives. This successfully contributes to a substantial increase in their social, emotional and educational development and achievement. Children receive awards for 'overcoming 'separation and loss' and for their increased 'confidence and self-esteem'. Fosters carers take pride in the fact that they can instil 'hope' in children and help them 'turn their life around'.

Children receive support to lead a healthy lifestyle; they join the gym and clubs to improve their swimming and football skills. Children are engaging in various forms of therapy and have improved emotional wellbeing; there is a decrease in enuresis, mood swings and self-harming. Children also have increased speech and improve their socialisation skills. Some children are learning basic aspects of their personal development, an example being playing with toys. Professionals highlight fostering placements are 'successful in dramatically changing' children's behaviour. Children benefit from valued life story work, enabling them to see foster care as a positive experience. They enjoy capturing their memories in photo albums and foster carers assist them with documenting their hopes and dreams. Children feel comfortable and they are able to share their former life experiences.

Children are achieving educationally and professionals highlight that they are 'exceeding expectations'. Children receive certificates which highlight their 'excellent behaviour and outstanding efforts at home and at school'. Some children also receive scholarships for private education. A high proportion of young people are pursuing further education including attending university. They also take advantage of apprenticeships and pursue a wide range of courses, examples being nursing, electrical installation, graphics and media, business studies and engineering. The agency is also working in conjunction with a widely recognised bank to provide a leadership programme for young people. Foster carers receive up-to-date knowledge on the education system, which enables them to strongly advocate for children's needs.

Children benefit from constructive contact with their relatives, friends and other persons who play a significant role in their lives. Foster carers and staff are extremely flexible and assist with contact, as agreed with the placing authority. They also help children maintain a meaningful bond, an example being helping them buy Christmas gifts for family members. The agency also offers telephone support, if children return to their families. The agency is a recognised contact centre and families can meet at their premises. The agency successfully works with parents, enabling children where possible to be reunited with their families. An example of the agency exceeding in their role is assisting with the reunification of a child overseas. Children highlight that they are made to feel part of the family, birth children fondly refer to children as their sibling. Social workers comment that children are 'made to feel part of the family which is excellent'.

Children benefit from an extensive range of support groups. The agency has a high

percentage of unaccompanied minors, Albanian children benefit from their own support group which provides an excellent opportunity for them to form friendships. They also obtain guidance and motivation from a graduate who shares their heritage and personal history. Children can enjoy support groups to develop their talents; examples are dance and football groups. Birth children can also share their feelings and develop greater empathy for children in care through learning about their general experiences. These groups also enable birth children to influence changes within the agency. Children also benefit from fun days and trips to the seaside or other places of interest.

Children engage in extensive individual activities, pursuing their hobbies and interests. This results in some of them achieving national and international success within their chosen sports. Children have the opportunity to follow their religion and cultural traditions, which includes attending places of worship. Children also receive practical support with their immigration issues, an example being escorted to the Home Office. The agency also has highly effective links with the Refugee Council. This enables children to access short courses and obtain valued legal advice.

Care planning has the child at the centre of the process. Children enjoy excellent individualised support. This takes into account their disability, race, culture, religion, communication and behavioural needs. Personal skills and specific training enable foster carers to effectively support transracial and transcultural placements. Children move into and out of their placement usually in a planned manner. Prior to meeting their foster carers children have an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the family through comprehensive picture profiles. This positively assists with them settling in. Local authorities highlight that some children have 'not wanted to move', when their placement was ending. One of the agency's key strengths is their exceptionally high placement stability rate, which is significantly better than the national average.

The agency has excellent arrangements for young people leaving care. A high proportion of young people are in 'Staying Put' placements, enabling them to remain with their foster carers for their early adulthood. The agency has their own charity and there are plans to formally launch a scheme where they give financial support to young people attending university. Foster placements enable young people to develop their independent living skills and make the successful transition to adult life.

Children have an active voice within the agency, positively influencing service development. Children contribute to foster carer and worker reviews and appraisals. Supervisory social work visits also focus on their needs and workers produce regular progress reports for each child. Two former looked after children sit on the fostering panel. Children assist with devising documentation, an example being the children's guide. They also assist with producing other material an example being the organisation's Christmas card.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children benefit from highly professional foster carers who tenaciously advocate for their needs. Local authorities highlight that 'the fostering placements are generally excellent at this agency'. Social workers are 'very impressed' and are in 'gratitude and awe in respect of the level of care'. Other professionals comment on foster carers going 'the extra mile'. Children receive care from foster carers who undergo continual training to equip them for their role. There is an excellent commitment to vocational training. The agency provides e-learning courses and there are further plans to promote flexible learning opportunities, to further enhance skills. Foster carers state they are 'pushed to achieve academic excellence'.

Children benefit from an extensive group of foster carers from wide ranging ethnicities and religions. It includes single carers as well as heterosexual and same sex couples. Although children may not always have a cultural match, skills matching of placements is exceptional. Foster carers are highly resourceful and use the internet, each other, community services and relevant professionals to ensure they proactively meet children's needs. Examples include taking children to private health care provision. Foster carers go over and above to ensure placements are successful and children leave in a better place. Foster carers champion children's needs for permanency and positively prepare them for adoption.

Meticulous marketing ensures weekly emails are sent to local authorities throughout London, the Home Counties, eastern and southern England highlighting the strengths of each fostering household. The fostering agency prioritises recruiting carers to meet the current complex needs of children. There is greater focus on recruiting a wider range of ethnicities, more White carers and a higher level of skills and relevant professional experience. There is an excellent recruitment strategy which is continually reviewed. The strategy precisely focuses on demand and local authorities needs. It is informed by research and an innovative analysis of all the London boroughs. They are working with a specialist marketing agency to ensure their recruitment meets children's presenting needs.

Supervising social work visits are child focused and also offer an opportunity for one to one training and formulating strategies to provide highly effective care. There is additional peer mentoring, regular supervision, annual appraisals and membership of Fostering Network. Foster carers benefit from regional resource centres, in Perivale, Croydon, Walthamstow, Reading and Suffolk. These are local hubs for training and support. Foster carers greatly appreciate the 24 hour support. They also have access to a therapist, who assists with training and telephone advice. Foster carers are able to constructively vent their feelings and obtain strategies to manage specific behaviours. The agency provides support workers to help foster families manage practical tasks; an example being doing the 'school run'. Foster carers describe this support as being 'priceless'. Foster carers receive additional rewards for maintaining stable placements, completing their vocational training and recommending prospective carers. They also receive formal recognition through the agency's award ceremony.

Children benefit from a highly influential, effective fostering panel, which has a

strong safeguarding element. The panel chair has significant experience in children's social care and provides strong leadership. The central list of panel members is culturally diverse and reflects an extensive range of expertise. The agency decision maker provides precise challenge where needed, to ensure they are 'getting the right carer'. They undertake their work within efficient timescales and written approvals comply with current guidance. The fostering panel provides innovative oversight of the approval and review of foster carers. This includes using technology which enables foster carers to attend the meeting remotely. The panel are an integral part of the agency and assist with wider agency decision making. An example of this is making a recommendation for the foster carer award. A valued dimension is their quality assurance function, which assists with the agency's continual improvement.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children are placed in an agency which has strong safeguarding arrangements. The agency has a national safeguarding lead person who provides expert knowledge and ensures consistent practice. There is a good awareness of e-safety, cyber bullying and links to relevant organisations for additional resources to support children. Bullying is not an issue and children feel safe. They do not routinely engage in risk taking or offending behaviours. Children do not go missing very often from this fostering agency. Foster carers, however, know what action to take if the whereabouts of children are not known.

Children receive protection from the agency's effective links with the local authority and safeguarding personnel. Foster carers provide a safe base where children are able to disclose issues. Foster carers are very perceptive and efficiently highlight concerns. Foster carers recognise the impact any abuse or neglect has on children and take appropriate action to support them. Staff actively request strategy meetings and work in a transparent manner to alleviate any concerns. There is a good understanding of the difference between child protection and quality of care issues. Children and foster carers know how to make a complaint. The agency competently manages issues in a prompt and efficient manner. The whistle blowing procedure also highlights the option staff have of referring matters to Ofsted.

The agency learns from serious case reviews. Foster carers and staff receive regular safeguarding training. Training keeps them updated on pertinent issues effecting children. Foster carers are aware of children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation, gang affiliation and youth violence. Foster carers take an active part in helping children make positive choices; a good example of this is helping them move away from gang involvement. Young people highlight that 'advice is good' and they appreciate the 'strictness' of their foster carer. Local authorities highlight that they 'always feel confident that the carers offered will provide a safe placement'.

Children receive protection from the agency's recruitment practices which comply with regulations. The agency undertakes regular Disclosure and Barring Service checks at specific intervals. The Home Office have also inspected the agency in

relation to their overseas recruitment. They verify the good practice and the agency has a licence as a tier two employer. Social workers are also registered with the relevant professional body, which further demonstrates their accountability.

Supervising social workers undertake at least one annual unannounced visit to fostering households. They routinely undertake health and safety checks prior to approval and on an ongoing basis. Foster carers assist with creating their own individualised safer caring policy. They benefit from comprehensive guidance which assists with keeping themselves and children safe. This includes internal and external risks, general safety and internet safety. A representative from the fire brigade also advises foster carers on fire safety. The police also speak directly to children. Individual safety plans enables foster carers to provide effective protection for each child. Children receive ongoing teaching regarding personal safety and they have increased awareness regarding their vulnerability.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children's diverse needs and well-being are at the heart of the fostering agency. Foster carers describe the agency as 'fantastic'. The agency has the support of the mayor, the local Member of Parliament and the Children's Minister. All were guests at the agency's last fun day. The agency is continually evolving and is a leader in their field. Local authorities highlight that Sunbeam is 'one of the top agencies' for partnership working. The agency has contracts with most of the London boroughs and a significant number of councils in southern and eastern England. They volunteer for pilot schemes and are currently working with a local authority to provide a wraparound service for children. This inspiring initiative means children with special needs are able to leave residential care.

The agency has an excellent website, which is an interactive resource for staff, professionals, prospective and current foster carers. The interactive website includes videos, forms, policies and procedures. The agency also has a presence on social media and there are plans to further develop further internet based services. The website includes a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which highlights the agency's aims, objectives, philosophy of care and the services available. Children also benefit from their own guide. These are age appropriate and are available in a variety of languages. This is extremely beneficial for children as a percentage of them are unaccompanied minors. Guides provide a highly efficient summary of the agency's and professionals' roles, what they can expect and the range of external support available to them.

The organisational structure meets the optimum needs of children. All directors and the majority of senior leaders are social work qualified, which gives a purposeful dedication to their role. There is a systematic focus to promoting the best interests of children. Senior leaders have lead responsibilities which include quality assurance, business development and foster carer recruitment. The Registered Manager is a forward thinking social work professional, with approximately forty years' experience.

This individual demonstrates a dynamic commitment to improving the service for children. The leadership is strengthened by highly competent team management, social worker and administration arrangements. There is recognition of the need for further personnel to effectively meet the needs of children. Forthcoming posts include an additional support worker and a senior social worker to develop the service for disabled children.

The comprehensive business development plan recognises the agency's key strengths and gaps. There is meticulous monitoring of looked after children and the regional averages. This informs the agency's strategic thinking and service development. The agency is subject to monitoring visits from a range of local authorities. They highlight that Sunbeam has been their 'preferred provider for many years'. Local authorities comment on the agency's 'excellence' and that it is 'gratifying to see the continued development'. They also commend the agency for welcoming 'the external scrutiny'. The agency uses these reports to further embed their processes with staff and promote consistent working. The agency is currently changing information technology systems and has a package specifically tailored to their needs. The agency is also a member of a national fostering association and other regional forums. They also endeavour to influence national policy through participating in central government consultations.

Children receive a service from an agency which has an excellent commitment to staff development. The fostering agency is an approved selector with the Open University and sponsors staff to undertake their social work training. Staff benefit from an extensive training and development programme, which includes post qualifying training and specialist support. The agency focuses on strengthening staff competence and confidence. Staff are kept updated on changes in legislation and practice. The increase in knowledge and skills of staff, ultimately benefits children. The agency provides a learning environment for staff and social work students on placements. The agency also participates in apprenticeship schemes, valuing participants by paying a higher than recommended salary.

The diverse staff team speak an exceptional number of languages. The agency has a very inclusive philosophy and they celebrate a wide range of religious festivals and cultural events. Staff benefit from regular individual reflective supervision, appraisals and team meetings. They also have a low, very manageable caseload. Staff state that the agency is 'very supportive' and they describe management as being 'very good'. They highlight that their views are valued and they assist with influencing changes in practice. Staff also appreciate that they also engage in fun activities. They go out for meals together and have their own awards system.

The agency is flourishing and is very financially sound. Foster carers receive their payments on time and are also able to request advance payments. The agency provides a comprehensive breakdown of their payments and enhancements are available for more complex needs. Foster carers additionally receive an annual bonus. The agency values constructive feedback and commissioned a top private company to obtain this information from local authorities. The agency conducts exit

interviews with foster carers. Children routinely complete questionnaires and the service is currently working on ways to further involve them in service development. The agency is very transparent and values the inspection process. Local authorities confirm this stating 'the open and honest ethos is evident throughout the agency'.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure 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, 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.