

Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Helen Humphreys
Type of Inspection	Key

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Date of last inspection	5 February 2007

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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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Alpha Plus Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency, which has been established for six years. It aims to provide a service for looked after children, referred to the agency from local authorities, with foster carers who are recruited, trained, assessed, reviewed and supervised by the agency. The agency currently has 51 carers caring for 87 children and young people, over half of who are placed either long term or permanently. The premises are in appropriate offices on a business park, close to motorway and public transport links.

Summary

This announced inspection was carried out over two days by one inspector with subsequent visits to carers. All the National Minimum Standards (NMS) were assessed other than numbers 31 and 32 as this agency does not provide a short break service or provide friends and family carers. This agency is providing an excellent standard of care for the young people placed and outcomes for children are good. The managers and staff provide a very good level of support to the carers, all of who are very satisfied with the service they receive. The agency is well managed by two experienced and competent managers who are supported by a staff team who are themselves experienced and skilled and are provided with good developmental opportunities. This is an agency which is well respected by placing social workers and carers. The agency continue to identify further areas of development and have also gained Investors in People award. A recommendation has been made for the agency to continue to try to recruit someone who has previously been accommodated by a local authority onto their fostering panel.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

This agency has continued to develop and improve in a number of areas over the last 12 months. There was only one recommendation made at the last inspection which was to provide training for carers of babies on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and this has been carried out. Carers found this helpful and useful advice.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

The agency promotes the health and well-being of the children placed. The staff and carers have appropriate information regarding health care needs of each child placed. Most young people have had their health care assessments. All young people are registered with local general practitioners and other health care professionals. The agency and carers are working with a range of external agencies to provide additional support and on occasions have contributed to the financial costs of these services as required. Carers are provided with a range of training opportunities including drug and alcohol use, sexual health, child development, attachment and loss and mental health issues. The agency employs a health care consultant who provides additional support, through training, individual consultations and advice. The carers value this additional service. The agency has updated their smoking policy in line with new legislation. All illness and accidents are monitored by the agency and health care matters are discussed and noted during carer's supervision.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements for the recruitment and selection of staff and carers are appropriate and thorough. The carers are providing a good standard of care. The carers' homes are maintained to a good standard and there is no over crowding. Young people like their bedrooms. Health and safety checklists are in place and these are regularly updated and monitored. Safe care policies are in place and additional training has been provided this year on safe care and these matters are regularly discussed at the support groups and during supervision. Additional resources have been provided to carers where there are concerns about risk. Unannounced visits to carers are carried out routinely and recorded on file. The arrangements for matching are particularly thorough. The manager is involved in all decisions regarding matching and a range of matters are taken into account. There have been no placement breakdowns in the last 12 months and a number of carers are only looking after one child even if they are approved for more to ensure that the needs of the young people can be met. All matching decisions are recorded and all carers report that they have never felt under pressure to take a placement. Over half the placements currently in place are for long term matches and all placements in the last 12 months have lasted longer than 12 months. The carers receive training in child protection, behaviour management and related matters. Carers are provided with additional support when they have concerns about behaviour management of children placed. There are very few instances of children being reported missing from home and these occasions are monitored and reviewed. Child protection matters in the last 12 months have been handled appropriately. No young person said that they were being bullied and a pro-active response was made to two matters raised in the child surveys. The panel is chaired by an experienced social work practitioner who also chairs other fostering panels. The membership of the panel meets the NMS, apart from having a care leaver as a member. The agency has tried to find someone to meet this need. The panel minutes are clear and concise and give clear indications of the discussions and decisions made. The panel is robust in decision making, is thorough and undertakes a quality assurance function.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The carers receive training on equality and diversity and related matters. Equality and diversity issues are discussed in the assessment process with new carers. Matters relating to cultural and religious needs are taken into account in matching and the agency have a range of carers with specific skills and experiences to meet a range of needs of children, including asylum seeking children. Some carers are looking after children with disabilities and additional support is provided which is valued by the carers. The arrangements for the promotion of education are particularly good. The agency employs an educational coordinator and learning mentor to support young people and carers. The educational coordinator monitors the progress of the young people in school and provides additional support in the event of young people requiring an advocate or other services. The learning mentor provides additional support in help with school work and advice to carers and young people. Carers receive training in supporting young people in education and related matters. All young people have a school place, there have been no exclusions in the last 12 months and most young people are making good progress with some achieving success in external examinations. All carers provide a range of leisure activities for young people, including membership of community groups. The agency provides two caravans for holidays at different locations and Christmas and summer outings.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency take contact arrangements into consideration when placing children. Contact arrangements are noted on file, discussed in supervision and carers receive support and training on how to manage the impact of contact. Young people are aware of their contact arrangements and are satisfied with them. For a number of children the frequency and quality of contact has improved whilst living with their present carers. Some carers provide additional support by providing transport to contact, supervising and some carers invite parents and friends into their own homes for special occasions like Christmas and birthdays. The agency engages the carers in a range of consultation events on a number of matters including development of the agency and their training requirements. In addition the agency holds events for children including social events and skills days. Staff make a point of ensuring that they see the young people when they visit on both general and specific matters. Young people are consulted on a range of day to day matters by their carers. The arrangements for statutory reviews are good and staff accompany carers and young people to the reviews and prepare a report. All young people know how to make a complaint should they wish to and information is provided in the Children's Guide and other information.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is outstanding.

The agency provides training, advice and support to carers who are preparing young people for independent living. A number of carers have supported young people after they have left home both practically and financially and some young people are being supported through university. The arrangements for the assessments of carers wishing to be come long term carers for individual children are good and appropriate procedures are followed. The agency pay the carers fees which are above the recognised Government rates and pay additional allowances and 'one off' payments for specific issues. The carers are all satisfied with the arrangements for payments.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency is managed by two experienced, skilled and qualified social work practitioners, who are involved in all day-to-day matters of the agency and are constantly seeking to identify further developmental areas. The Statement of Purpose and Children's Guide have been updated and submitted to Ofsted. The Children's Guide is available in two versions, one for younger children and one for older and are available on a compact disc. The agency employs a sufficient number of skilled, competent and qualified staff who are well respected by the carers and young people. Staff receive regular supervision, training and developmental opportunities and attend regular team meetings and social events. The systems and processes are clear and known to staff. The agency has a sufficient number of carers to meet the present needs of the agency. They have recruited a small number of carers over the last 12 months who can meet specific needs. The standard of assessments are very good and meet the NMS and current good practice recommendations. The agency provides an extensive range of support to carers which they value highly. This includes regular visits, supervision, training including crèche facilities, support groups, a men's group, out of hours telephone support, and access to support services. The case records are well organised and contain a range of information and documents the carers

and staff would need in order to care for the young people appropriately, and provide a historical record for young people in later life. The administrative records are also well organised, orderly and easily accessible. All records are securely stored.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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Recommendations

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

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.