

Alliance Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Trisha Gibbs
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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

Alliance Foster Care is a Private Limited Company and an Independent Fostering Agency based in Collingtree Northamptonshire. The Directors of the company are the Registered Manager and Registered Provider. The staff team includes an operations manager, a principle social worker and four social workers. In addition to this there are support workers, an administrative team, a training officer and a youth opportunities development officer. The agency provides a range of fostering placements. At the time of inspection the agency was providing 66 placements with 45 carers.

Summary

Young people continue to benefit from having their health needs appropriately monitored and responded to. Children are encouraged to participate in activities that educate and encourage them to live healthy lifestyles. The agency has developed a range of very good systems to keep children safe and to appropriately match children to appropriate placements. Child protection and safeguarding procedures and training have been reviewed and updated. Educational achievement is positively supported, monitored and celebrated by staff and carers. The views and contributions of all children and young people are highly valued. Some very good work is being undertaken with young people. Carers are committed, well-trained and positive about the support they receive. The strong management team supports staff and closely monitors the work of the agency. They constantly seek to improve the quality of placements and evidence good outcomes for children.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

No areas for improvement were identified at the last inspection.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is outstanding.

Children's good health is positively promoted. Children's individual health needs are fully detailed in an excellent placement agreement and are monitored closely on a monthly basis. Carers support children to attend for essential routine health checks and these are recorded on a separate health and medical information form. This information is forwarded to placing social workers on a monthly basis. Good health information is provided to carers in the Carer Handbook and in regular newsletters. Very good health related training including first aid, mental health issues and drug awareness is provided to carers. There is an expectation that carers will attend for these. The agency engages carers and children in activities that promote healthy lifestyles. The summer project last year focussed on 'good health and happiness' with the aim of helping children to understand the importance of a healthy diet and regular exercise and hygiene. As part of the project children were asked to grow something to eat and to take part in a food tasting activity. They were also invited to write a cookery book about their favourite food and recipes. Photographs and records of the summer events showed that children took part enthusiastically and were proud of their achievements. A special sexual health and personal care day for girls was recently arranged by the agency youth worker. The young people enjoyed taking part and engaging in beauty activities after attending a workshop about sexual

health. A 'goody bag' containing toiletries was given to them at the end of the day. A similar event is being set up this year for boys. The youth worker has also produced an attractive leaflet for all young people that provides ideas for eating a healthy diet. The leaflet details three healthy meals a day on a twenty pound a week budget.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

There have been no new appointments to the staff team since the last inspection therefore no staff recruitment files were looked at on this occasion. At the last inspection staff files were well organised and contained evidence of all checks being appropriately undertaken. The agency has robust recruitment procedures in place. All carers are provided with identity cards. The agency child protection procedures have been significantly updated and expanded and good clear systems are in place for responding to safeguarding matters. Child protection and safe care training is routinely provided for all carers. Currently safe care plans are not child-specific, however potential placement risks are assessed and accounted for in placement agreements. End of month summaries also consider risks and strategies implemented. All carers have a family policy and fire plan that is reviewed annually. Health and safety checks are carried out for each annual review. Good training is also provided to carers to enable them to understand children's behaviours and to respond effectively. A psychotherapist employed by the agency provides workshops and consultation time for carers to discuss behaviours that they find challenging. A strong fostering panel receives new applications and provides a good quality assurance role, monitoring annual reviews and other agency activity. The panel is well constituted with an experienced and appropriate membership. Panel minutes are very good and provide a clear record of all panel business. Excellent matching systems are in place to find the best possible match for each child referred to the agency. Shortfalls are identified within a clear matching matrix form. Placement agreements are thorough and cover all aspects of children's needs and identify how the placement will appropriately meet these. The agency continues to evidence a strong commitment to careful matching of children to placement.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

Carers and staff are provided with training and workshops to help them understand and celebrate children's individual needs and cultures. Records show that where matching processes identify placement shortfalls the agency endeavours to find ways to positively address these. Examples were seen of placements where carers had been supported and provided with information and training to meet children's cultural needs or care for a child with a disability. The carer handbook gives good attention to culture, values and religion. Very positive work is being undertaken with children of all ages to encourage them to develop and achieve and enjoy themselves. Planned fun and activity days feature in all newsletters to carers and children. They confirmed in the surveys returned how much these occasions were enjoyed and that children felt valued by the agency. The agency is consistently child-focussed. Children are positively encouraged to develop their own interests and hobbies. The youth worker is undertaking commendable pieces of work with young people and care-leavers, supporting them to prepare for independence and to gain confidence to enter further education or work situations. She is now registered to support young people to achieve the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and five fostered young people are either doing this or have achieved awards. A qualified agency resource worker actively supports the children in their school placements and ensures that an education plan is in place

for every child. Files demonstrated that a strong 'holding' education plan had been promptly drawn up for a young person very recently placed. School attendance and achievement is routinely and formally monitored. The management team have identified key performance indicators to measure performance. Extra tuition is available to children who need this. Monthly summaries capture education information for each child. Carers are provided with training on life chances and education and are very aware of their role in supporting school placements. Children are actively encouraged to read and rewards for achievements are often in the form of books. During the summer they were encouraged to read five books. Their poems photographs and letters are often featured in the young people's newsletter.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

Carers actively support and facilitate contact arrangements. Records confirm that contact is properly detailed and risk-assessed within the placement agreement. All children have a contact plan. Carers record that contact has taken place and are expected to note how the child has responded to contact. Carers receive training on contact issues and show a very good awareness of the needs of children and parents within these arrangements. The agency values and respects children's thoughts and contributions and seeks to obtain these through joint activities, individual pieces of work and an interactive CD Rom. Children and young people are seen alone by supervising social workers regularly and given opportunities to say what they think about their placement experiences. Children were consulted last year about the kind of activities they most enjoyed as a means of identifying scope for future activities. They are routinely asked for ideas and contributions in their newsletters which also include competitions and puzzles. The role of carer's own children is recognised and valued and they are included in agency activities and events. At time of placement supervising social workers are required to confirm in writing that they have explained to each child, according to their age, how to make a complaint. Examples were seen of agency staff advocating on behalf of children. Feedback from children in all surveys confirm that they know how to complain and that they feel listened to by their carers and the supervising social workers. Children are appropriately consulted about their own reviews and carer reviews.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is outstanding.

The agency statement of purpose provides appropriate details about the service provided. Children and young people are provided with booklets, leaflets and an excellent interactive CD Rom which tells them about being in foster care and gives them advice as to where they can seek help if they need it. The agency continues to develop systems to monitor performance and to measure placement outcomes for children. There is a clear management structure. The management team is experienced and very well qualified and have maintained a strong and consistent service over the last year despite some unavoidable absences. The staff team are appropriately qualified and organised and everyone spoken to felt supported and valued by the managers of the service. Staff said they did not feel alone when responding to challenges presented by placements and that they always received full support from the management team. Regular supervision and annual appraisals are provided to staff at all levels. The

administrative support underpinning the day-to-day operation of the service is professional and efficient. There are sufficient carers to provide well-matched placements for the children referred to the service. Managers promote good relationships with placing local authorities. In some instances they meet regularly with commissioning partners to ensure that placement issues are effectively communicated. Very good feedback from placing social workers and a commissioning officer about the fostering service was provided for the inspection. Carers are well supported and provided with very good and relevant training opportunities. There are clear expectations with regard to how many courses they should attend. They spoke with evident enthusiasm as to how some training sessions had inspired them in their work and had positively assisted them in responding to placement situations. Carers enjoy their local fostering support groups which are attended by an allocated supervising social worker. Carers said in surveys and during the carer meeting that they always receive help in an emergency whenever they need it, whatever the time. Newsletters for carers provide good information about events, publications and websites that they might find helpful. Many carers have achieved or are undertaking National Vocational Qualification level 3 and managers confirmed the imminent implementation of the fostering core standards induction training. Agency records are of a very good standard. Carer and children's files are well organised and maintained. Essential planning documents were present on files looked at and both carers and staff confirmed that managers actively pursue essential information where this has not been provided at time of placement. Files are routinely monitored and outcomes of these checks recorded at front of file. Very good administrative systems are in place and files 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.