

# Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

Inspection report for Independent Fostering Agency

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<b>Date of last inspection</b>	04/01/2008

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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 outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and the relevant National Minimum Standards for the service.

### 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. It provides a service for looked after children, referred to the agency from local authorities. A range of foster carers are provided. They are recruited, trained, assessed, reviewed and supervised by the agency. The premises are in appropriate offices on a business park, close to motorway and public transport links.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Since the last inspection there has been a change of ownership over the last 18 months. In January 2010, a new manager was appointed and registered with Ofsted. Some staff have moved on and posts have been restructured to maximise the services provided. Carers have been supported throughout this uncertain period. They have been appraised on developments through consultation days, letters, the review process and supervisory visits. The manager has made a concerted effort to make introductory visits to carers. Despite the changes, the quality of service has not been compromised. Although carers are aware about the changes and express some anxieties, the majority confirm that the quality of support provided has not changed or is better. Retention of carers remains good and no carers have left as result of the changes.

The fostering agency is an outstanding child centred service that young people benefit from. The agency is well managed by a competent, knowledgeable and experienced manager. They are supported by a stable, motivated and qualified staff team and the chances has presented a solid infrastructure. Staff are skilled in their work with carers and young people and have a range of developmental opportunities. There is a strong capacity for further improvement that the manager has identified and is committed to driving forward. The agency has excellent links with services, such as local authorities, health, education and safeguarding. They are proactive in their communications with them, which promotes the safety, protection and welfare of young people. Carers and young people highly rate the support provided. A typical comment from a young person indicates this: 'Thank you Alpha Plus for helping me throughout the year, for trying to do their best for everyone in care and I appreciate your help. Thank you'.

No actions or good practice recommendations were made as a result of this inspection.

## **Improvements since the last inspection**

There was one good practice recommendation made at the last inspection. This relates to the appointment to fostering panel of a member who has been a child in care. The agency continues to seek an appropriate person who will provide a strong contribution at panel proceedings. This good practice recommendation is reiterated.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The support provided to carers, to promote the health of young people, is of exceptionally high quality. This includes the high levels of support provided to young people with disabilities and babies. Young people's health needs are clearly identified. Carers are informed about known health needs and register young people with key health professionals as soon as possible. Carers know how to access additional resources to meet young people's emotional and mental health needs. There have been occasions when the agency has provided additional finance towards the cost of services in partnership with local authorities. This means that young people get a prompt health service. Young people confirm that they get support and advice about being healthy.

Young people have up-to-date health needs assessments. This demonstrates what their health needs are and how they will be met. Immunisations are up to date and carers ensure that health records are well maintained and up to date. This means that young people are protected from harmful diseases. Carers actively support young people to attend health appointments. Young people are helped to understand their health conditions and the impact this may have on their lives. This ensures they take control of their health in a manner that is empowering. Carers are clearly aware about their responsibilities to record health information. This is regularly monitored by the agency.

Carers who administer medication to young people are appropriately trained. Medication is appropriately stored and administered. Carers have attended training on a range of health issues. This includes health and hygiene, first aid, sexual health, drug and alcohol awareness, self-harm and child development. The agency makes good use of the health care consultants. They are used to deliver training and offer support and advice to carers, the agency and fostering panel. The training enhances carers' understanding of young people's health needs.

## **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is outstanding.

The arrangements to ensure the safe recruitment and selection of the manager, staff and carers are robust. The agency ensures that all the required checks are carried out. This includes enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks and telephone verification of references. Carers and young people are involved in the recruitment of

staff. These are good practices that involves positive participation and ensures that young people are properly safeguarded from people who may pose a risk to them. The manager is suitable to carry on the agency. They are competent, knowledgeable, experienced and well respected. They have led significant developments in the service in a relatively short timescale. The impact of their actions has not impaired the support provided to carers and young people. This is to be commended because it ensures the safety of young people is not undermined.

The agency provides suitable foster carers. They ensure that young people live in safe, healthy and nurturing environments. The standard of accommodation seen is clean, hygienic and of high quality. Social workers from the agency visit carer's homes at regular intervals and they are annually inspected. Unannounced visits also take place once a year. Health and safety risk assessments are completed and safe care policies are relevant and up to date. Young people's bedrooms are personalised, well equipped and young people say they like their rooms and home. Carers provide transport as appropriate and their details are verified. These measures ensure that young people are safeguarded by practices that promote their safety around the home.

The agency matches children to carers exceptionally well. Matching is very specific and the agency ensures that matches are appropriate and in the best interests of young people. This results in high placement stability and placement breakdowns are taken seriously. Most placements are planned and there has been one exemption in the last 12 months. The manager and team are involved in matching and they take into account a number of issues. There are occasions when information is not always forthcoming from local authorities. However, under these circumstances, young people are placed with very experienced carers. Clear matching considerations are recorded. Carers speak positively about the matching process. They are aware about their strengths and show great levels of tenacity and robustness when placements have been particularly challenging.

Carers for young people in trans-racial and trans-community placements make it a priority to ensure they meet young people's racial and cultural needs. They appreciate the training, updates, support and information to ensure the best possible care is provided.

The agency protects each young person from abuse and neglect. They ensure that carers are aware about their responsibilities in this area. Carers have updated child protection, behaviour management training, individual training and support. They effectively communicate significant issues with the agency and other professionals. Carers know that corporal punishment or any other form of humiliation is not acceptable. The agency promptly responds to any issues of concern regarding carer's conduct or the small instances where physical intervention has been reported. This is thoroughly addressed and responded to in a firm but supportive way and in consultation with carers, young people and local authorities. A small number of children have experienced bullying in school. These have been addressed on an individual basis to stop this behaviour. One young person remarked about the action their carer took to protect them from bullies: 'I'm not being bullied at the moment

but I used to...successfully expelled three of the worst bullies in my school'.

There are good management systems in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in care. The manager takes allegations against carers and concerns seriously. They actively instigate communication with local authorities and safeguarding agencies and provide support to carers. This is regularly and closely scrutinised. Ofsted are notified as appropriate.

Fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively. It is properly constituted. Most of the membership meets the national minimum standards. This is with the exception of an independent member, who has experience of being cared for or has had children in foster care. The fostering panel is chaired by an experienced independent social worker. They have extensive experience of chairing fostering panels. The panel continues to be robust in the decisions made and provides a thorough quality assurance function. Panel members are assertive and ask pertinent questions. The panel minutes clearly illustrate the discussions and decision making process. This means that young people's safety and welfare is promoted by a quality system that protects them in foster care.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

The support provided to promote equality and diversity is promoted, practiced, delivered and overseen to an exceptionally high standard. Young people are cared for by people who highly value diversity and promote equality. Young people from all backgrounds and children and young people with disabilities are provided with high quality care that promotes their holistic needs and provides a range of experiences that are socially inclusive and accessible to them. Carers have shown great passion, creativity to ensure that children can develop their interests and live their lives to their full potential. Carers are very well supported to ensure that babies and young people with disabilities have access to appropriate equipment and adaptations.

Carers are actively supported with the appropriate and regular training and support. This ensures that they are aware of equality and diversity issues. This is explored during the assessment process and post approval. Carers are proactive and undertake research to understand cultures different to their own. This is done effectively and in the best interests of young people. Carers receive regular training on equality and diversity and individualised training is provided to help carers understand young people's specific needs. Overall, carers feel that the service promotes equality and diversity issues in 'outstanding' and 'good' ways. Typical comments include 'Alpha have always adhered to culture, ethnicity and disability and have a variety of foster carers who can give the foster child their required needs'; 'Our child was placed with us because it was thought that they had an identity problem and he needed to understand ... ethnicity'. A number of trans-racial placements have resulted in good outcomes for young people.

The support provided to promote the educational attainment to children and young people is supported to an exceptionally high standard. The agency's learning mentor supports young people on an individual basis and provides additional help with literacy, maths and any other learning needs. The support is a valuable asset to carers and schools. Young people confirm that they are helped with their education and a number are making good progress. The support provided ensures that young people are not disadvantaged in the education system. Carers are supported by the agency to attend education meetings and have the relevant information, such as personal education plans and education statements. They value this support. Carers say 'Alpha has been very supportive with education and given good training to us too'; 'I had to appeal a decision to refuse a looked after child a place in local school. This was successfully dealt with by the agency'. Carers receive training on how to support young people's education. All young people attend education. This includes young people who have been out of the education system for some years. There are no permanent exclusions and attendance is very good. This is monitored by the agency.

Carers provide activities for young people and the agency promotes social events that include carers and their children and fostered young people. Trips are organised and carers have use of caravans. This is provided free of charge by the agency in attractive locations. The agency held a celebrations event this year in recognition of carers and young people's achievements. This was a successful and enjoyable occasion and demonstrates how the agency values carers and young people and the things they do. Included are carers who were successfully nominated by the agency and will be awarded an MBE for their contribution to fostering. These and other events are reported on in newsletters.

## **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is outstanding.

Contact is actively promoted by the agency and is taken into account during the matching process. Carers are aware about the reasons for contact. They support and facilitate with transport as appropriate. Carers are sensitive to the negative impact that contact can have on young people's behaviour. This understanding is enhanced by the training. Carers record information about the impact of contact and keep the agency informed. Young people are aware about their contact arrangements. Young people are also encouraged to have positive contact with friends.

The agency promotes consultation in a positive and meaningful manner with carers, young people and carers' own children over a range of issues. This has contributed to positive changes in service delivery and promotes a child-focussed service. For example, the carers review forms are now personalised following young people's feedback. Young people are consulted about their statutory reviews and know how to complain. Young people confirm that they know who they can talk to if they have any concerns or worries.

Some young people have independent visitors and are seen alone and spoken with during supervision visits as appropriate. Carers also act as excellent advocates for



young people. Carers have been properly consulted about the agency reorganisation. This is reflected in the low number of negative comments made by carers about the impact that the changes have had to the quality of support.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

The agency prepares young people for adulthood. Carers are well supported to help develop young people's independence skills. This is irrespective of young people's age and ability. Carers are trained on the issues of moving on, whether this is moving young people towards permanency, independence or return to families. Most young people indicate that they are helped to think about their future plans. Positive interventions from the agency's support worker ensure that young people benefit from individual time and they respond well. Pathway planning is underway for young people preparing towards independence.

Payments to carers allow them to sufficiently care for young people. No carer has raised an adverse issue about the payments system.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The Statement of Purpose has been updated. It clearly states the aims and objectives of the services and facilities the agency provides. The Children's Guides are available in more than one version to ensure they are age appropriate.

Leadership in the agency is strong and child focussed, which contributes to an effectively monitored and controlled agency. Management and staff roles are clearly defined and staff acknowledge their levels of accountability. All members of the team take their role seriously. There are good systems in place to monitor the activities under the relevant schedules. The manager evaluates the information. They can demonstrate how well the service is performing, identify targets and prioritise areas for improvement.

The agency benefits from an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff. The recruitment strategy is known to the team. The plan to recruit new staff and carers is progressing well and restructured posts will soon be filled. There are a range of carers who can meet the needs of the agency and the recruitment strategy is shared with the team and reviewed annually. The agency ensures that carers have the right skills to meet young people's needs.

Staff are organised and effectively managed. Staff are well managed and their skills are nurtured and developed. They feel very supported, valued and trusted with their decision making. The staff team have gained a lot of respect for the manager and benefit from their enabling management style. Staff are competent, knowledgeable about the carers they support and those of their colleagues. This is good because it

means that carers do not have to explain themselves when they contact the agency. This is a highly motivated and committed team. Those who supervise and support carers are qualified social workers with transferable skills.

There are good systems to prioritise workloads and ensure that work is completed within timescales. Staff present as hardworking, child focussed and confident that they can meet deadlines and not compromise on quality. The standards of assessments are very good and meet the national minimum standards and good practice standards. These are also commented on positively by the fostering panel. Staff are supportive of each other and enthusiastic about the reorganisation and are involved in the agency developments. All new staff undergo a probationary period and induction. They are professionally supervised, appraised and have good training opportunities tailored to meet their needs. Team meetings are regularly held.

Carers understand the role of the agency social workers. They overwhelmingly report that they feel the support provided is mostly excellent and good. The support relates to visits made at regular intervals, supervision, training, including tailored training to meet placement needs. Training provided to carers is excellent. It is flexible and meaningful to carers. Carers undertaking the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) National Occupational Standards for foster carers are making good progress. The agency has provided a range of support mechanisms to ensure carers complete by April 2011. Carers are supported at carers' groups, the male carers' group and out of hours support and support. Carers are also supported as and when they need it. Comments made by carers about the support include 'I have been with Alpha Plus for 8 years. They have always supported me 24x7x52 and sometimes that's a good thing at 2am. They are still there to listen without judgement'; 'My girls are part of my family and treated as my own and I have brought them up as if they are my own. I have peaks and troughs but Alpha has always been there to support me'.

Annual reviews are prepared to a good standard and the agency submits a report to the independent reviewing officer. This is made available to the fostering panel for scrutiny. This is a good process. It clearly demonstrates the impact that carers make on the lives of young people. It also shows aspects of consultation with children, carers and professionals.

Case records for carers and young people are well detailed and maintained to an excellent standard. This is good because it provides clarity should any issues arise. They also provide a clear account of young people's histories and progress in placement. This means that young people have a reference should they wish to access their files in the future. Administrative records are maintained as required and are well maintained and can be easily sourced. All records are stored in a secure environment. This ensures the promotion of privacy.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. This is integral to, and permeates throughout, all aspects of service delivery.

## **What must be done to secure future improvement?**

### **Recommendations**

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

- appoint an independent panel member who is normally a person who has been a child in care (NMS 30.9).