

# Able Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Monica Hargreaves
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<b>Setting address</b>	D B H, The Bridgewater Complex, 36 Canal Street, BOOTLE, Merseyside, L20 8AH
<b>Telephone number</b>	01515500158
<b>Email</b>	ablefosteringagency@googlemail.co.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Able Care Services (Northern) Limited
<b>Registered manager</b>	Ian Hastings
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Claire Marie Oates
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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**

Able Fostering is an independent fostering agency, which is a limited company. It operates from an office in the Bridgewater complex, on the outskirts of Bootle. The agency assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people who are placed by neighbouring local authorities.

### **Summary**

The overall quality rating is good.

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

This is a good service. The agency is well managed and staff are all suitably qualified and experienced. There are robust arrangements for recruiting, assessing and training foster carers. These ensure that carers are suitable and that they have the knowledge and skills they need to provide good care to children and young people. Arrangements for the supervision and support of carers are also robust and carers confirm that they are supported very well by the manager and supervising social workers.

The agency has developed good systems to ensure that children and young people are safeguarded. These include safe recruitment practices, good training for carers and a range of policies and procedures to guide the practice of staff and foster carers. Young people themselves say they feel safe.

Children and young people placed with foster carers have their health needs met and are supported to maintain healthy lifestyles. Their education is actively promoted by carers and they are encouraged to take part in leisure activities that they enjoy. Young people say that they are consulted about all aspects of their care and they feel able to talk to carers. Foster carers help young people to take part in their reviews so that they are involved in all the decisions that are made about their lives.

There are effective management arrangements which ensure that the work of the service is monitored and that good standards are maintained. These include good levels of staff supervision and regular staff team meetings, as well as checks on records.

Two good practice recommendations have been made as a result of this inspection. These relate to the agency's development plan and foster carers' supervision notes.

### **Improvements since the last inspection**

Not applicable. This is the first inspection of this service since its registration.

## **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is good.

The agency has effective systems in place which ensure that the good health of children and young people is promoted. The manager makes sure that detailed information about young people's health needs is obtained from placing authorities when a placement is sought to enable carers to understand and meet those needs. Carers receive appropriate training about health issues to support them in their care of young people. Carers make sure that the young people placed with them are registered promptly with a doctor, dentist and optician and are taken to all routine health appointments. They keep clear records of all such appointments and of any illnesses or accidents that affect young people as well as records of medication that they are given. Medicines are stored safely in carers' homes in order to protect young people. The health of young people is monitored by the agency through regular discussions between carers and their supervising social workers.

Foster carers understand the importance of promoting a healthy lifestyle and they encourage young people to eat healthily and to take part in activities to promote exercise. Carers make sure that young people have food that meets their individual cultural or religious requirements. They also encourage young people to try different foods to broaden their experiences. Foster carers give young people advice about issues that have an adverse effect on their health, such as the use of substances or alcohol. There is clear evidence that young people have made good progress in relation to their health. For example, young people have been supported to stop using substances and to eat healthily.

The manager of the agency has developed good links with local health agencies, such as the looked after children's nurse. This enables carers to access additional services for young people if a need is identified.

Carers' homes are well maintained, internally and externally, providing young people with spacious accommodation and a healthy and safe environment. Each young person has a separate bedroom and communal spaces shared as a family were found to be spacious and comfortable. All foster carers are trained in health and safety issues and supervising social workers undertake an initial health and safety check on all foster carer households, including a risk assessment on pets. The service has been in operation for a little less than a year and therefore no carer has yet had an annual review. However, there are sound arrangements in place to ensure that this happens and that all health and safety checks are formally reviewed as part of the process.

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

The provision is good.

The fostering service ensures that all young people are effectively safeguarded. Carers are trained in safe care during their assessment and induction. This enables

them to develop a good understanding of issues that may affect the safety and welfare of the children and young people they care for. For example, they are trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of abuse and are given clear guidance about what they should do if they identify a safeguarding concern. All carers develop a safe care policy for their own home which is discussed with supervising social workers and young people themselves. These plans ensure that the safety and well-being of young people is promoted. The agency has a clear protocol for responding to incidents where a young person may go missing from a carer's home. Carers understand the protocol and know what they should do if a young person goes missing. There have been no such incidents since the agency started work.

The manager has developed strong links with the Local Authority Designated Officer for safeguarding and with the local police. This ensures that there is good communication and effective partnership working with these agencies to promote the best interests of young people.

Carers have positive relationships with young people. They provide young people with reasonable boundaries and encourage them to understand how to protect themselves and keep safe. Young people say that they 'get on' with carers and that they feel safe.

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

The provision is good.

The agency makes sure that foster carers are given good information about young people so that they can plan for and provide care that meets their specific needs. Carers provide warm nurturing homes for young people which enables them to make good progress in their care. They support young people to learn to behave appropriately and evidence from this inspection confirms that young people behave well.

Carers show a strong commitment to ensuring that young people do as well as they can in school. They have a good understanding of young people's educational needs and make sure that they attend school every day. Carers contribute fully to education meetings and advocate on behalf of young people if they experience difficulties in school. The agency makes arrangements to ensure that carers and young people themselves are supported if young people are excluded from school. There is good evidence of the success that carers have had in supporting young people back into education after a significant period of time out of school. Young people make plans for their future and talk about what they would like to do when they leave school.

Carers involve young people in family activities and encourage them to continue with any hobbies or activities they are interested in as well as trying new ones. One young person said that they had been windsurfing which they really enjoyed and another young person had tried dance classes and Guides. Carers also help young

people to make and sustain friendships in their local community and school. This helps young people to develop confidence and promotes their self-esteem.

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

The provision is good.

Children and young people are fully involved in all the discussions that take place about their care. They are helped to complete review consultation forms and supported at review meetings so that they can make their views known. They are also supported by carers to make decisions about their day-to-day care. For example choosing their own clothes and deciding how to spend pocket money. Young people say that carers listen to what they have to say and feel that their views matter. The agency has developed a separate quality assurance monitoring form for children and young people so that their views about how the fostering service works can be taken account of and reflected in service developments.

The agency gives young people good information about foster care and the service itself. This is produced in a format that is clear and easy to read and understand. The guide includes the details of individuals who are independent of the service who young people can contact if they wish. Young people know how to complain and say that they would always let someone know if they are not happy. Carers also understand the formal complaints process and say that they would feel confident that complaints would be dealt with properly. There have been no complaints about the service.

Foster carers have a good understanding of the importance to young people of maintaining positive contact with family and friends. The agency makes sure that contact arrangements are clearly defined in the young person's placement plan and carers work to promote contact in line with these plans. This enables young people to keep in touch with individuals who are important to them and promotes their sense of identity.

## **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is good.

The fostering service has good arrangements in place to ensure that children and young people are prepared for adulthood. Foster carers are given appropriate training and there are clear policies to guide them in this aspect of their work. They help children and young people to develop the social and practical skills they need for future independence, at a pace that is appropriate to their individual age and needs. For example, all young people are encouraged to help to keep their own rooms clean and tidy and to help with other household tasks. As they grow older, young people are encouraged to learn how to manage their money and to save. Carers support all young people to achieve in education and to make plans for their further education, training and work.

At the time of this inspection, there was no young person placed with foster carers who was of an age to require a pathway plan. However, in discussion, carers demonstrated a good understanding of the pathway planning process.

## Organisation

The organisation is good.

This is a well-managed service. The manager is experienced and appropriately qualified and provides effective leadership and good support to social workers and foster carers. Supervising social workers have the necessary qualifications and experience for their role. Foster carers say that they are supported very well by the manager and social workers in the team. Social workers have monthly supervisory meetings with carers. Supervision notes confirm that these meetings address all areas of individual young people's needs. Records of their supervision meetings are kept in carers' files in the office, but at this inspection, not all carers had been given copies of these notes.

The recruitment and approval processes for foster carers are robust, ensuring that the service provides foster carers who are suitable and competent. Assessments of prospective carers are undertaken by a qualified social worker and detailed reports are presented to the foster panel. The panel is made up of a number of independent professionals and includes an experienced independent foster carer and a young adult care leaver. The foster panel manages the work presented to it effectively and the agency decision maker acts promptly on the recommendations made by the panel. As the service has been in operation for less than a year, there have been no annual reviews of carers. However, the agency has good arrangements in place for managing these. Carers made positive comments about the way their application to the agency had been dealt with, saying that the assessment process was 'thorough and fair'. The recruitment process for carers includes detailed vetting procedures. Staff and panel members recruited to the service are also vetted. These checks protect young people as they ensure that all carers and staff who work for the agency are assessed as suitable.

Carers undertake a core programme of training during their induction and are required to complete the Children's Workforce Development Council training for foster carers. Members of the foster panel are also given appropriate training to maintain their knowledge and skills. Carers feel that training opportunities are good and that the manager and staff are flexible about when this is delivered. This enables them to plan training around their family and caring commitments. Careful matching of carers with young people ensures placement stability.

The agency's Statement of Purpose provides detailed information about how the service works. There is evidence from this inspection that the fostering agency works well to meet its stated aims and objectives. The agency also provides good written information about fostering to children and young people.

There is good management oversight of the work of the agency. The manager



supervises social workers regularly, attends team meetings, checks reports and records and also meets foster carers and members of the foster panel regularly. In addition, the responsible individual has undertaken a management review of the first year of operation of the service. The agency's manager is aware of the strengths of the service and the areas in which it intends to develop, but there is no up-to-date written development plan to confirm this.

The agency maintains clear written records of all aspects of its work with young people and carers. Detailed information about young people is obtained from placing social workers in order to ensure that young people's identified needs are met. Carers' files and other information that is kept in the office is stored securely. Foster carers are provided with copies of all policies and procedures and have clear fostering agreements in place. Carers understand what information they need to keep about young people and this is kept safe within their homes to protect confidentiality. These records are checked by supervising social workers. The service is based in suitable premises that are kept secure.

The promotion of equality and diversity is good. Staff in the agency work closely with children, young people and carers to ensure that individual needs are clearly identified. The service has good systems in place to ensure that young people's specific needs are effectively met. Staff, carers and panel members attend training in equality and diversity. Policies and procedures reflect the agency's commitment to ensuring equality of opportunity for staff, carers and young people. The agency's recruitment procedure focuses in a positive way on applicants' abilities and the appointment of carers, staff and panel members confirms non-discriminatory practice.

## **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):

- ensure that all foster carers have a copy of the notes from their supervisory meetings (NMS 21.8)
- ensure that there is a written development plan, reviewed annually, for the future of the service. (NMS 18.2)