

# Alliance Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspector</b>	Suzanne Young
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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

Alliance Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Northamptonshire. The company is part of the National Fostering Agency. The staff team includes an operations manager, acting agency manager, a team leader, a carer recruitment officer and three social workers. In addition to this there is an administrative team, an education worker and a youth opportunities development officer. The agency also uses the services of a psychotherapist.

The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements including parent and child placements.

### Summary

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

The agency strongly promotes the health, safety and well-being of children with outstanding outcomes for children and young people being achieved. Children and young people's social and emotional needs are actively promoted by foster carers and staff. There is excellent support to carers to promote and develop positive behaviour. Staff work with children and young people on an individual basis and through group work to promote self-esteem and offer emotional support to develop a sense of self and belonging in their placements.

Education is actively supported and promoted. The agency has a dedicated education support officer who has responsibility for supporting education for looked after children. This level of support promotes the educational attainment of children and young people, improves communication with schools and provides immediate support to children and carers with difficult education issues.

Young people are well prepared and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential. There are excellent arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence by ensuring foster carers support young people to develop age-appropriate independence skills.

The fostering agency is managed by people who are experienced and suitable to work with children and young people. It is managed effectively and efficiently delivering an excellent service which meets the needs of its users. The agency undertakes careful and effective matching of children and young people with carers which helps to ensure placement stability. The recruitment of foster carers is robust. Assessments are comprehensive and analytical. The fostering panel and agency decision-maker make timely and thorough decisions about the approval and reviewing of foster carers. The agency work hard to create a 'family feel' to carers, children and staff. Foster carers receive excellent support and feel highly valued.

Two shortfalls were noted leading to recommendations. These are around foster carer training and the roles of unqualified staff.

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

There were no requirements or recommendations made at the last inspection.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

The health care needs of the children and young people are effectively identified, supported and met. They live in foster homes that provide a healthy environment and have the space they need. Foster carers are proactive in promoting healthy living and are aware of the diverse health needs and requirements of those placed with them. Children and young people are encouraged to participate in a wide range of activities and have excellent access to health care resources required to meet their health needs.

Foster carers are provided with a high level of health care information and are clear about the arrangements that are in place to consent for young people to have medical treatment to ensure any delay is prevented. The agency offers excellent health support to foster carers and staff through monthly consultations with a qualified psychotherapist to address specific health issues.

There is a strong emphasis on health promotion within the agency. They engage carers and children in activities that promote healthy lifestyles. Activity days such as a 'stepathon' and 'boys to men' sexual health day are organised. These involve foster carers, looked after children and carers' birth children and focus on the importance of a healthy lifestyle and regular exercise. This strong emphasis on health promotion is also continued through direct work offered to children and young people by supervising social workers. They work with young people on an individual basis to encourage and promote areas such as personal hygiene and sexual health.

Foster carers receive training in first aid as part of their core training. Further training for foster carers is available in health matters, such as drug and alcohol awareness, mental health, self harm, autism and learning disabilities. Specialised training is also actively sought for foster carers to support them to promote the individual health and development needs of the children and young people being cared for. This ensures foster carers are fully able to meet the health needs and requirements of children and young people placed with them.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people say they feel safe in their foster homes. Their safety and welfare are actively promoted by the agency through clear and comprehensive systems which ensure the protection and safety of children and young people in their care.

Foster carers receive safeguarding training as part of their core training to ensure they are aware of their roles and responsibilities in supporting and safeguarding children and young people. Further safeguarding training is also available to carers and staff in partnership with local colleges. Guidance is provided to carers to safeguard young people against any form of internet abuse such as internet bullying and to prevent or minimise access to inappropriate websites. This ensures foster carers and staff have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of safeguarding issues affecting children and young people looked after by the agency.

Supervising social workers ensure safeguarding is given a strong focus through direct work undertaken with children and young people. They conduct protective behaviour sessions with foster carers and young people and provide training to young people in such areas as fire, home and road safety.

Fostering households have comprehensive safe care policies that are specific to their families. Risk assessments are undertaken when matching children and young people to their foster placements to help identify any areas of risk and help inform the safe care policies. This ensures that the safety and well-being of young people is effectively promoted.

Children and young people rarely go missing. When this occurs foster carers work closely with designated police officers and other agencies to ensure they return as quickly as possible and respond to positively to them on their return.

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people enjoy strong relationships with their foster families and interact positively with them. Children and young people are happy within their foster families and younger children interact with their foster carers in a positive way. One young person commented 'I have good food, get to do a lot of activities and experience cuddles whenever I need one.'

The agency is proactive in ensuring foster carers are supported in managing their feelings and responses arising from caring for children who display challenging behaviour. The agency employs a psychotherapist who offers workshops and individual consultations with foster carers and staff to address these issues and to offer strategies in managing behaviour.

Supervising social workers and the agency's youth development worker also provide excellent support to foster carers. They work with children and young people to promote and develop positive behaviour on an individual basis promoting self-esteem and offering emotional support. This helps to develop a sense of self and belonging in their placements.

Children and young people are able to access activities and leisure pursuits. Foster carers support and encourage them to engage in a range of leisure activities from, trampolining and swimming to joining the St John's Ambulance and horse riding.

The agency is child centred and inclusive. A youth development officer ensures that young people have access to excellent leisure opportunities. The agency is registered to support young people to achieve the Duke of Edinburgh Awards. Staff spend time with foster carers, looked after children and foster carers' birth children during a range of activity days organised by the agency. Young people have also recently taken part in the 'Cooks and Kids' initiative, which paired up looked after young people and their carers with celebrity chefs.

The agency has a strong focus on the promotion of education. The agency has a dedicated education support officer who has responsibility for supporting education for looked after children, attending education meetings and liaising with schools and local authority education departments. The agency also provides funding for year 10 and 11 pupils for extra tuition when this is required and supports children and young people to go on school trips. This level of support promotes the educational attainment of children and young people, improves communication with schools and provides immediate support to children and carers with difficult education issues. One placing social worker commented that his young person 'has made tremendous progress in the time he has been living with his foster carers in all aspects of his life. In the summer he achieved several GCSE's and commenced college in the autumn. Without the necessary support, encouragement, guidance and most importantly of all the commitment he received it is doubtful he would have been so successful.'

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

The provision is outstanding.

Children and young people's social and emotional needs are actively promoted by foster carers and staff to enable them to develop resilience, self-control and improved social skills. They are receiving excellent individual and personalised care from carers that is meeting their needs. This is enhanced by an equality and diversity plan that is completed for each young person as part of the matching process. Children and young people feel part of the family and feel included and participate in their foster home.

Children and young people are carefully matched to their foster placements. Wherever possible children and young people are welcomed and leave foster homes in a planned and sensitive manner which makes them feel valued. Foster carers are

given all the information that is known about the children they are looking after.

Foster carers are supported by supervising social workers and the agency's youth development worker and psychotherapist through regular visits, individual consultations and direct work. They offer focused work which helps to promote a sense of identity and belonging. This helps children and young people to develop in confidence and self-esteem which lead to greater stability in placement. This level of support is recognised by other professionals who commented that the agency is 'an excellent provider of care for children and young people.'

The agency has developed creative and innovative ways in which to promote and encourage communication ensuring that the wishes and feelings of children and young people of all ages and abilities can be heard. They can express their views in newsletters, one-to-one discussions with supervising social workers and through group activities and sessions with the youth development worker. Children and young people say that they are listened to and their views are sought. The role of foster carers' own children is also recognised and valued. They are regularly consulted about their views and feelings and are included in agency activities and events.

Foster carers' actively support and facilitate positive and constructive contact arrangements with family and friends. Foster carers work closely with families transporting children to contact. Where appropriate, for instance in parent and child placements, carers' encourage contact with friends and family in the foster home. This means that children and young people keep in touch with their family and community and are not isolated.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is outstanding.

Young people are well prepared and supported into adulthood so that they can reach their potential and achieve economic wellbeing. The agency ensures there are arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence by ensuring foster carers support young people to develop age appropriate independence skills. Foster carers also support independence skills as part of parent and baby assessments in which the ability to plan and budget is an integral part.

The agency is creative in meeting the needs of young people and develop resources specific to them. The youth development worker has developed an independence living skills assessment pack which is delivered through individual sessions with young people. This helps them to understand their pathway plan and for it to be meaningful to them. It is a comprehensive independence programme which covers practical independence skills such as shopping and cooking as well as developing financial knowledge and looking at health, education and support networks.

The youth development worker conducts several outings with young people to

enable them to experience new opportunities. Such trips have included taking young people to Mercedes world driving experience. The youth development worker also runs workshops with young people supporting them with work related issues such as creating CVs and has developed links with further education college courses.

The agency further supports young people in their independence by encouraging them to open bank accounts for them and funding driving lessons.

## **Organisation**

The organisation is outstanding.

The promotion of equality and diversity is outstanding. The agency works closely with children and young people to ensure they receive excellent personalised care that meets their needs. The cultural and religious needs children and young people are considered during the matching process through detailed diversity plans. Policy and procedures are in place and diversity and equality is featured throughout the preparation and post approval training. The service is proactive in matching children in appropriate cultural placements. Where this is not possible foster carers are supported to meet children and young people's needs with excellent guidance and support.

The fostering agency is managed and staffed by people who are suitable and qualified to work with children and young people. It is managed ethically, effectively and efficiently delivering an excellent service which meets the needs of its users. Although the agency is currently without a Registered Manager arrangements have been put in place which ensures the agency delivers an effective service which meets the needs of its users. The appointment of a permanent Registered Manager is being made in a timely manner.

Any allegations and suspicions of harm are handled appropriately and in line with government guidance. Clear systems for managing serious incidents, allegations and complaints are in place. These are monitored and evaluated by the management team to develop quality of care and practice. Robust recruitment procedures are in place which ensures that all appropriate checks and references are undertaken and appropriately ratified.

Staff receive regular support, supervision and appraisals. They report that they feel very well supported by the management team. In addition they receive clinical supervision monthly with the agency psychotherapist.

The agency has a Statement of Purpose which provides a clear outline of the aims and objectives of the service it provides. The children's guide is available in paper format and as an interactive compact disc. This enables children and young people of all ages and abilities to have an understanding of the service provided to them. Records are well maintained and clear and contribute to children and young people's understanding of their lives.

The agency ensures prospective foster carers are recruited and assessed to ensure they meet the needs of children and young people. Assessments are comprehensive and analytical and identify the strengths they have or need to develop.

The fostering panel is undertaken by a core group of members who make timely and thorough decisions about the approval and reviewing of foster carers. The fostering panel is made up of people from a central list who have a good mix of suitable skills, knowledge and experience. The panel also provides a quality assurance function by feeding back on the quality of reports being presented to panel.

The agency undertakes careful and effective matching of children and young people with carers which helps to ensure placement stability. Children's needs are carefully matched to carers' skills and where there are gaps in matching the agency ensures resources are put in place to meet those needs. Foster carers are provided with all the information available to enable them to care effectively and appropriately for children and young people in their care. Careful and focussed matching ensures placements stability which leads to more successful outcomes for children and young people.

There is a comprehensive training programme available for foster carers to assist them in meeting the specific needs of children and young people. This includes specialist training such as parent and child assessment, children with disabilities and autism. Foster carers have personal development plans which set out how they will be supported to undertake ongoing training and development that is appropriate to their needs and experience. Foster carers have completed or are in the process of completing the Children's Workforce Development Council induction programmes. A small number of carers, however, have not completed this within the deadlines set by the national minimum standards. Carers are positive about the training they receive and feel it helps them to carry out their role effectively.

The agency work hard to create a 'family feel' to carers, children and staff. The agency provides extensive support and advice to foster carers. Foster carers receive regular supervision from qualified social workers and attend local fostering support groups. They are also able to access support from the agency's psychotherapist whenever they feel this is required. Unannounced visits have been taking place on an annual basis although these have not been conducted by a qualified social worker as required.

Foster carers feel highly valued, and well supported. Carers have commentated that 'they have always been outstanding with regards to this. If you need extra support they will do this with 100% commitment.' The agency 'gives us 24-7 support all year round' and 'has very approachable kind and friendly staff who are always willing to give you sound advice and support.'

## **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 foster carers attain the Training, Support and Development Standards within 12 months of approval (NMS 20.3)
- ensure foster carers receive at least one unannounced visit a year from a named, appropriately qualified social worker. (NMS 21.8)