

ABC Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|
| Unique reference number | SC360525 |
| Inspection date | 28/02/2013 |
| Inspector | Dawn Bennett |
| Type of inspection | Full |
| Provision subtype | |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Setting address | ABC Fostering Services, 13 Cross Street, Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire, WR15 8DA |
| Telephone number | |
| Email | abcfostering@btconnect.com |
| Registered person | ABC Fostering Services Ltd |
| Registered manager | Jennifer Good |
| Responsible individual | Nicholas John Dunster |
| Date of last inspection | 05/10/2009 |

© Crown copyright 2013

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

ABC is a private limited company operating as an independent fostering agency. The service was first registered in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 on 23 March 2007. It offers a number of different types of placements for children and young people; emergency, short-term, assessment, bridging, long-term, parent and child and permanent placements.

At the time of the inspection the service supports 46 fostering households who care for 46 children and young people.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

Good: a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

Adequate: a service that only meets minimum requirements

Inadequate: a service that does not meet minimum requirements

Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **outstanding**.

The fostering agency, staff team and foster carers have clear values and ethos that are underpinned by the 'Secure Base' model of fostering. Managers, staff and foster carers are highly skilled and committed to fostering. They have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the agency through rigorous monitoring and quality assurance processes. These are used to actively drive continuous improvements in outcomes for children and young people, the skills of foster carers and in service provision.

Birth and foster children and foster carers are actively and imaginatively involved in their own individual development as well as the development of the service. They are very well matched in stable placements. They access a wide range of high quality support and services that result in exceptional personal progress and outcomes. Children and young people report that they are happy and secure in their placements and are positive about the care they receive. Foster carers state they are well informed, receive stimulating training and are excellently supported by supervising social workers and support workers.

Safeguarding practice and monitoring are well embedded in the fostering agency. The agency has good systems in place to ensure children and young people are kept

safe. Comprehensive assessments of foster carers' skills are conducted and robust risk assessments are carried out. These ensure children and young people's welfare is promoted and they experience positive outcomes.

One recommendation has been made as a result of this inspection in regard to the agency's recruitment and vetting procedures.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- ensure all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of the fostering panel, have telephone enquires made to each referee to verify the written references prior to appointment. (NMS 19.1)

Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for young people are **outstanding**.

Children and young people receive an outstanding level of individualised care that meets their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs. Their views and participation are key to the high quality care they receive and the development of the service. They influence their lives by being actively involved in day to day decisions. They also contribute to the operation of the fostering service by attending consultation events and responding to questionnaires where their views are gained and changes to the service result. For instance, young people have recently redesigned the young people's newsletter.

Children and young people are happy in their foster placements and are treated as part of the family. They make outstanding personal progress in developing a positive self-view and make and sustain strong attachments with their carers. Young people stated that when they first arrived at their foster family they were welcomed: 'They showed me around the house and my room', 'They introduced me to family members over the following couple of weeks', 'They asked if I was hungry and cooked for me before helping me settle in', 'They visited me in hospital and sat and chatted.' Young people complimented their foster families stating, 'they are outstanding', 'good listeners and very supportive', 'say it as it is but good fun and have your best interests at heart', 'they ask for your opinions and as far as possible implement feedback'.

Children and young people's needs in relation to their ability, ethnicity and identity are excellently met. They are appropriately matched with foster carers who can meet these needs. Where appropriate, they know why they are placed with foster carers and have a very clear understanding of their future plans. They are supported by

foster carers who work effectively as part of a wider team, supported by support workers and supervising social workers, as well as external professionals. They are sensitively and successfully supported to work through complex issues such as being separated from their family, bereavement and sexual exploitation.

Children and young people lead healthy lifestyles. Their health needs are proactively addressed by their foster carers whose care and vigilance has resulted in outstanding outcomes being achieved. Young people know how to keep healthy and where appropriate take responsibility for their own health. They understand the importance of eating healthily and rarely engage in risk taking behaviours or activities such as drugs or alcohol use. A parent and child placement stated: 'Foster carers have helped me but not interfered with my care of my baby. They have opened their home to my health visitor. They have been sensitive to our needs and I have found them and ABC very supportive.' A healthcare professional stated: 'Foster carers are well supported by ABC. They are tuned into the care needs of the baby and its mother. They encourage the bonding process and promote good quality care that results in excellent outcomes.'

Children and young people make exceptional personal educational progress. Those who have historically not attended education or have been excluded are supported to re-engage. School and further education attendance and educational progress is promoted by foster carers and the agency at all times. As a result, with support from foster carers, children and young people are making good and outstanding personal progress in their educational achievements. They also participate in a wide range of educational, community and leisure activities such as ballet, stage coach, judo, gymnastics and swimming. Achievements are recognised and celebrated within their foster family and by the staff team.

Young people develop into confident well-informed young adults. They are actively supported to learn the skills required to successfully live independently. The agency uses a life skills inventory to prompt and support foster carers and young people to gain relevant skills and knowledge. It has also recently developed 'staying put' arrangements. Young people learn to drive, experience work experience and employment, attend further education and achieve well supported transitions into adulthood. A social worker stated: 'The young person remains very settled with her carers and she feels her confidence has continued to grow. She is managing well with developing her independence skills. She is cooking at least twice a week, is capable with washing, ironing etc and she is managing her money really well and can plan her finances.'

Quality of service

The quality of the service is **outstanding**.

The 'Secure Base' model of fostering is themed throughout the work of ABC Fostering. For example, from the initial visit stage to prospective foster carers through to assessment, approval and foster carers' annual reviews. The model is central to all work undertaken by staff and foster carers. It is introduced to all foster

carers as part of preparation group training and is used to assess the extent to which each applicant can meet the qualities required.

The fostering agency has over the past year successfully recruited a more diverse range of carers who effectively meet the needs of the children and young people placed. Recruitment plans continue to target areas where recruitment needs are identified and this also informs the on-going development plan of the agency. For example, the increased need for child and parent placements led the agency to develop a specialist five day training package. This training is compulsory for foster carers approved for parent and child placements. It has also been attended by all the agency's staff team.

The assessment of foster carers is comprehensive and leads to effective placements being made and maintained. The assessments of foster carers are detailed and analytical. They focus strongly on the needs of looked after children but also the understanding and needs of birth children. The process includes a minimum of one unannounced visit to the foster household. It also incorporates the outcomes of serious case reviews, for example, the importance of foster carers' previous relationships being explored fully. Supervising social workers meet on a regular basis to discuss the progress of current assessments. Additional support as well as a second critical eye also exists through a peer buddying system. This is newly introduced and currently evolving practice that is having positive outcomes by sharing outstanding practice.

Prospective foster carers are excellently prepared prior to becoming approved. The preparation and training of prospective foster carers enables them to have an insightful understanding of the complexities surrounding the fostering task. Clear matching is also taking place with considered thinking about looked after children's and birth children's needs and carers' skills. This ensures well-matched safe placements are made.

Foster carers are seen as integral to the team around the child. They have professional relationships with local authorities and external agencies who speak highly of their standard of care and the outcomes they achieve with the children and young people. Professionals stated: 'In particular I would like to commend the work undertaken by the foster carer in a case that would have suffered greatly if it had not been for her tenacity and hard work. The foster carer explored the potential for conciliation within a family who had become estranged. The results were very positive for the young person', 'Foster carers are excellent carers and have done an amazing work with the young person and are very child friendly and able to understand his needs very well. ABC as an agency has been very proactive and child focused.'

The fostering panel is effective. It makes timely, child-centred recommendations and is robust in its scrutiny of assessments and reviews. It is supported by sound administrative systems and is well constituted with a wide range of appropriately qualified and experienced professionals. A high level of quality assurance function has been developed which ensures the quality of assessments are improved and

maintained. This is further strengthened by the agency's Register Manager and senior practitioner who effectively oversee the supervising social workers undertaking the assessments.

Foster carers are effectively trained and supported to meet the diverse needs of the children and young people they care for. They receive a high level of induction, mandatory and developmental training. Where complex needs require specialist care or knowledge, foster carers are given specific training prior to or during placement. Over the last twelve months significant work has been undertaken to the training programme for 2013. This now includes a workbook and modular training on the 'Secure Base' model.

The agency also gives high priority to the on-going development of foster carers. Foster carers receive regular quality supervision and have commented that they receive outstanding support: 'When a child is placed the supervising social worker always comes out,' 'They are in regular phone contact', 'At the end of placements they are also very supportive,' 'They always talk to my children (both foster and birth),' 'We have just put in to adopt the two young people placed with us. The support that ABC has given us is excellent. They have come along to all meetings and have supported us to attend the relevant adoption training.'

The agency is very strong in encouraging participation with foster carers and with young people. There is a participative annual action plan that reviews the previous year's events and sets objectives for the next year. Participation events are regularly organised where carers, birth and foster children can share their views to improve practice and the quality of care. They are actively involved in planning and their views are highly regarded by the fostering service. Foster carers feel very strongly that they work in partnership, sharing responsibility with staff and other key professionals.

A key strength of this agency is the work undertaken to support foster children as well as birth children. All birth children are included in the foster carer assessment and approval process. Supervising social workers have regular contact with all foster and birth children throughout placements. Staff work individually with foster and birth children where there are identified needs. They also run participation groups. Consultation and participation of all children continues to be reviewed and developed. Recently foster carers' reviews have been enhanced. A more flexible and imaginative range of tools have been introduced. These ensure the views of children are gathered not just through discussion and questionnaires but also through play and art work. All of this work provides invaluable support to foster carers and ensures the whole of the family is supported.

Safeguarding children and young people

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The agency has strong and systematic systems in place to ensure children and young people are kept safe. There are established safeguarding and child protection policies

and practice that provide a clear focus and lead in this area of work.

The agency holds an annual safeguarding day and regular training, which ensures foster carers and staff learn from any safeguarding issues and reviews to practice. It also ensures relevant practice and policy issues are discussed and addressed.

The agency's quality assurance model looks on a quarterly basis at patterns and trends relating to safeguarding incidents and high risk behaviours. The agency has also introduced additional indicators of safety. For example, they monitor the number of children over the age of seven who cannot swim and the number of young women aged 13 years and over with personal alarms.

The agency has low instances of children and young people going missing with three incidents so far in 2013. For some young people this is an outstanding achievement. When this has occurred external agencies confirm appropriate action is taken in partnership with appropriate professionals. Challenging behaviour is sensitively addressed and young people are emotionally supported by well-informed foster carers. Where high risk behaviour does take place, disruption meetings are convened to ensure appropriate strategies are in place to support children and foster carers. Allegations are handled carefully and promptly. Managers and staff liaise closely with all relevant professionals and share information appropriately. Where there is a shortfall in practice by a foster carer it is quickly and thoroughly explored and appropriate actions are taken to address it.

The agency adopts a very thorough matching process, incorporating robust risk assessments, which ensures that young people's safety is highly prioritised from the commencement of their placement. A detailed and comprehensive risk assessment is completed on every child prior to placement. This helps identify the risks of any behaviours and action required to minimise the risk.

From the point of placement there are established strategies that ensure foster carers, looked after children and birth children are seen and supported on a regular basis by supervising social workers. Each foster carer is supported by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who undertakes visits and formal supervisions throughout the year. Unannounced visits are taking place twice a year with one undertaken by the supervising social worker and the second undertaken by the Registered Manager or Managing Director.

Children and young people say that they feel safe with their foster families and know how to complain. They feel their foster carers support them to feel safe from bullying and abuse and feel confident that carers know how to respond if they may be experiencing bullying. All foster carers and young people are alert to the potential impact of new technologies and social media. Safe caring policies reflect how household practices specifically promote the safety of the young people accommodated. Each time a new child is placed in the foster home the policy is updated to reflect their specific needs.

Recruitment and vetting of staff is robust, however, the telephone call to verify

written references is not always taking place prior to appointment. Where appropriate foster children and foster carers sit on an interview panel that informs the appointment of all new staff members.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of the independent fostering agency are **outstanding**.

This is a very well-managed fostering agency. Robust strategic management ensures constant review and consolidation of practice. This results in an outstanding and continually evolving service.

Quality assurance monitoring is highly effective and continues to be developed to ensure a consistently improving delivery of care. There are a wide range of quality assurance systems that feed into quarterly and annual reports to the ABC Board. For example, all foster carer's and children's files are audited by the Registered Manager each 6 month period. Unannounced visits to foster carers are carried out twice a year once by the supervising social worker and once by the Registered Manager or Managing Director. A quarterly analysis of focused data is shared with the staff team and panel then scrutinised by the ABC board. These are all analytical and evaluative and used to actively drive continuous improvements. As a result the agency knows its areas of strength and there are comprehensive development plans addressing aims and objectives for the future.

The agency, Registered Manager, staff team and panel are proactive in developing the service in line with research and local identified needs. For example, the agency has introduced the 'Secure Base' model of fostering to enhance practice. This is now threaded through assessment, approval, training for supervising social workers and foster carers, review of foster carers, supervision for supervising social workers and foster carers and measuring outcomes for children. An on-going programme of training throughout 2013 is planned to consolidate all foster carers' practice based on the five dimension model.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guides are clear and accessible to all ages and a range of abilities. This ensures everyone is clear about the aims and objectives of the service. All policies and procedures are regularly reviewed and have the same clear and informative structure. They all start with underpinning regulations and national minimum standards, they all link to relevant ABC forms and other policies and then to national guidance on specific areas (children missing from care guidance for example, or the national guidance regarding health or educational needs of children in care).

Since the last inspection in 2010 the agency has grown in numbers of staff and foster carers. All of the previous requirements and recommendation from the last inspection have been met. The Registered Manager and staff team are all qualified and highly experienced.

Staff and foster carers feel valued and speak highly of the agency. The engagement of staff and fosters carers is integral to care planning and service delivery through training events, participation days and surveys. They are enthusiastic and committed to their role. Both staff and carers are well supported and kept up-to-date through relevant training programmes. Supervising social workers and managers regularly discuss recent research and how this can inform their practice.

Foster carers state that the support they receive from the agency is outstanding: 'There is always support available on the phone and my relationship with my supervising social worker is excellent, which is a real benefit to my fostering experience. I also feel part of the agency,' 'We feel working with ABC is very rewarding and we feel part of an excellent team.'

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 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.