

Ascent Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Ascent Fostering Agency is a new privately owned independent fostering agency which provides long and short-term placements for children and young people aged 0 -17 years old with a range of needs.

At the time of this inspection the fostering agency had seven approved foster carers supporting 11 children and young people.

The range of fostering services provided by the agency are: short and long term and emergency placement, parent and child arrangements, teenage specialist placements and brother and sister groups.

The agency is also supported and has good links with a charity organisation that provides mentors to all children and young people accommodated by the agency.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **good**.

This is the fostering agency's first inspection since being registered in November 2012. The fostering agency is supported by a small management team consisting of the Registered Individual and Registered Manager who are both the directors of the organisation. The agency recruits social workers as and when required to undertake

the assessment of prospective foster carers.

The overall effectiveness was judged as good except leadership and management which was judged as requires improvement. This is mainly in relation to the Registered Manager undertaking the role as the agency's decision maker.

All foster carers are new to the agency and have recently been approved. Therefore, this inspection was unable to compare any trends found nationally.

The children and young people are settling well into their placements, and some are thriving from their original starting point. The fostering agency is committed to valuing every child and improving their outcomes through providing all children and young people with a mentor if they so wish. Foster carers are passionate about providing the best possible care, for the children and young people. Children and young people spoken to were happy with their foster parents and felt safe. Children and young people are matched with foster carers who receive sound support and care advice through the school and placing authority.

The fostering agency has good links with a charity youth group who enables and challenges young people to become leaders of their own lives. Children and young people who attend the youth group are able to make new friends and are encouraged to participate in new activities.

Foster carers are supported and supervised appropriately. Foster carers spoke positively about the support they receive and feel the management team are very flexible especially in times of need. Therefore, the impact for children and young people is positive.

The areas of shortfalls identified relate to the Registered Persons updating the Statement of Purpose to include parent and child arrangements and to make the children's guide appropriate to the age and understanding of the children. The current arrangements regarding the agency decision maker requires review and policies and procedures in relation to missing and safeguarding requires updating.

Areas for improvement

Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person/s meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply with the given timescales.

Reg.	Requirement	Due date
3 (2011)	ensure that the fostering service provider compiles a written statement in relation to the fostering service ('the Statement of Purpose') which consists of a statement as to the services and facilities (including any parent and child arrangements)	31/01/2014

	provided by the fostering service. (Regulation 3(1)(b))	
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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):

- ensure that if a child is absent from the fostering home and their whereabouts are not known (i.e. the child is missing), the fostering service's procedures are compatible with the local Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocols and procedures applicable to the area where each foster home is located (NMS.5.6)
- ensure the children's guide includes a summary of what the fostering service sets out to do for children, how they can find out their rights, how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, the Children's Rights Director, Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate (NMS 16.4)
- ensure that the fostering agency's procedure for child protection is in line with Government guidance and requirements, including the duty to refer information to statutory bodies. It is known to foster carers, fostering service staff, volunteers and children (NMS 22.2)
- ensure that the fostering agency's decision-maker is a senior person within the fostering service, or is a trustee or director of the fostering service, who is a social worker with at least 3 years post-qualifying experience in childcare social work and has knowledge of childcare law and practice. (NMS 23.12)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people enjoy good outcomes. Many form positive relationships with their foster carers. A good number of children and young people have enjoyed long-term stability within their placement, and this has continued although there has been a change in the management of their carers. Children and young people commented on how things had improved with regards to the new fostering agency. They knew the manager by his first name and found his visits refreshing. They also said that manager was always introducing something new to them, like joining the drama or football club.

Children and young people feel safe and secure. They trust their foster carers. They are valued and have learnt to feel good about themselves. They make appropriate decisions and know their foster carer understand their needs, even when they feel their carer may be strict with them on issues of going out late with friends.

Children and young people feel empowered. They are developing a voice within the

agency although this is fairly new. They are positive about the new mentoring scheme and are confident in expressing their views and opinions. This scheme is in its initial stages of implementation, but the impact has made a difference to some young people through additional support, guidance and having someone whom they can talk to. Children and young people know how to get support if they feel they are a victim of being bullied or discriminated against. However, the children's guide in place, does not list all the contacts they may wish to call if they are worried.

Children and young people are placed with foster carers who can meet their identified needs. Children and young people benefit from healthy lifestyles. Foster carers are good role models and ensure young people have access to the various health services they need. Children and young people with complex medical care needs thrive within nurturing fostering households and are effectively supported by carers. Children and young people demonstrate a good awareness about potential health risks, such as alcohol and drug use, smoking and sexual health. They learn to take responsibility for making appropriate choices.

Children and young people benefit from attending educational establishments which meet their needs. Foster carers have established positive relationships with schools. They understand the needs of their foster child and provide them with additional help and support at home. Attendance at school is high; this is between 70 to 95%. Children and young people are making positive decisions about their education and see this as a way of improving their life choices and chances as a result. Children and young people also spoke positively about the activities they do with the charity and the support they get with homework.

Children and young people maintain appropriate family contact. Foster carers understand the importance of contact and in some cases to rebuilding relationships. Children and young people enjoy the family unit and those who live with their brothers and sisters said 'it is good having their family around them'. Children and young people value the guidance and support they receive from their foster carers.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Although, the fostering agency is new, those involved with the fostering agency are very satisfied with the support they receive. For example, they agreed that the management team is supportive and listens, and they are child focus. Foster carers stated that the management team are always available and are contactable any time during the day and night. The majority of foster carers are experienced carers and they compare their support as excellent.

The fostering agency recruits a range of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of children and young people who they looked after. The agency does not provide short break service, but does offer parent and child support. Foster carers spoken to demonstrate what supports are in place for them and the children and young people. They spoke about the charity project which enables the children and

young people to have another support network outside of the home. They all shared how the children and young people have become part of their family and settle well.

Foster carers receive training and supervision. All foster carers are new to the agency, but are experienced carers. They bring with them a wealth of skills and knowledge, which is evidenced in their individual training portfolios. All foster carers commented on the therapeutic fostering training. They all identified this as excellent training saying that this is one of the best training programmes they have received since being a carer. They spoke about the contents of the training, which explored the needs of the child, and also their own personal histories and how this impacts on what action they take. The training programme is in its initial stage of implementation and there are plans to provide more specific training to support those foster carers with children and young people with complex needs.

Foster carers work effectively with the children's social workers so that placement remains suitable and stable. Foster carers are actively involved in planning of the child or young person placement.

The fostering panel promotes safe, secure and stable placements through active engagement with the fostering agency. The panel members have all been recruited from a range of diverse backgrounds, knowledge and expertise. The majority of the panel members are independent. Having the expert knowledge enables the panel to make effective and qualitative decisions. At the time of the inspection the agency's decision maker was the Registered Manager. The agency is aware of the impact of this and is reviewing the Registered Manager's role.

The fostering agency works with the child's social worker to ensure that the placement plans are reviewed regularly. The agency is in the process of working with the responsible authority with regards to delegated authority therefore each child with the carer is able to manage any risk appropriately such as sleep overs with friends.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

There are good arrangements to safeguard children and young people. The Registered Manager is the designated lead for child protection. The Registered Persons are aware of their role to protect and safeguard children. All allegations or suspicions of harm are responded to appropriately. All foster carers have undertaken training in child protection procedures and are confident in following the agency's procedures. Foster carers understand the potential impact of abuse on children and young people; they are fully aware of the procedures to protect them. There were no referrals made to the independent review mechanism. The Registered Manager has made good links with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer for Child protection.

There are clear procedures in place to follow if a child or young person is missing

without permission. There are clear accounts of how the agency has worked well with the local police when this has occurred with positive results for the child supported by the foster carer and their responsible authority. There are rigorously monitoring and support systems in place to support any child or young person at risk of missing from care. Foster carers explain to children and young people what is happening and help them to understand the plan to protect themselves if they go missing. The agency's child protection and missing person's procedures, although recently updated, do not reflect the current guidance with regards to Working Together to Safeguard Children 2013 and the Runaway and Missing from Home and Care (RMFHC) protocol and procedures for the applicable authority where each foster home is located.

Children and young people strongly stated there were no issues with bullying and foster carers are aware of how to address any bullying issues if they occur.

Children and young people are supported to take age-appropriate risks and develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. They know how to complain, and feel able to do so. Children know who they can talk to about any concerns they have. They feel confident that they will be supported and listened to and that their concerns will be addressed. The fostering agency involves children and young people in discussions, groups and strategies to raise awareness of risk, and to help them stay safe.

The agency's ethos is to have robust skilled and specialist foster carers who have a clear understanding of their role and how they support the child. They are committed and are very child focus. Foster carers commented that the agency is strong on supporting and protecting children and this was evidenced through the recruitment, the preparation and training they received prior to approval.

All foster carers receive regular supervision visits which include unannounced visits. All visits are child focused and children and young people stated they are always asked questions and are involved in the discussion with their foster carer.

All staff and panel member recruitment and vetting are thorough and complies with statutory requirements. The recruitment processes in terms of staff and foster carers ensure protection for the children and young people. All checks are completed before any approval is made. Social workers responsible for assessments possess the qualifications, experience and skills to undertake the role effectively.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **requires improvement.**

Many aspects of leadership and management are sound. The management team have a good working relationship. The Registered Manager undertakes the majority of the roles and responsibilities within the agency due to its size; this includes the role of supervising social worker and the agency's decision maker. The Registered Persons are aware that they need to review the manager's role and responsibilities

and have put some actions in place to address this. However, the impact of this could not be fully measured at the time of this inspection.

The Registered Persons have a clear understanding of the needs of the agency and the children and young people they care for. Having a group of foster carers, who understand their roles and responsibilities enhance this along with the mentoring system for the children. The management team knows the strength of the agency and where improvements are to be made such as: improving the Statement of Purpose and children's guide, and reviewing the management structure in terms of their roles and responsibilities.

The Statement of Purpose and children's guide are in place. Both documents were not available in a user friendly format. The Statement of Purpose did not reflect all of the services the agency provides such as parent and child arrangements. Also, the children's guide does not include a summary of contact details such as the Children's Rights Director and Ofsted in the event them having a concern. Children and young people spoken to state that they did receive a copy of the guide; some found it more useful than others.

All notifiable events are submitted and the Registered Manager was able to demonstrate evidence that appropriate follow-up actions had been taken. These are regularly reviewed through the placement plans, to maintain the stability of the placement and the progress of the child or young person.

The agency produces monthly data which indicates what has improved and where improvement can be made, with regards to maintaining good outcomes for children. However, due to the agency being fairly new this could not be measured effectively apart from the number of carers being approved. The Registered Persons are aware of the current market trends within the organisation's location. This is linked to the recruitment of foster carers and used as part of the agency marketing tool to obtain contracts. The agency is well staffed and financially viable.

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, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

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.