

Alliance Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Setting address	1 Maple Court, Ash Lane, Collingtree, NORTHAMPTON, NN4 0NB
Telephone number	01604 879 373
Email	admin@alliancefostercare.co.uk
Registered person	Alliance Foster Care Limited
Registered manager	Maria Glover
Responsible individual	Iain Anderson
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Service information

Brief description of the service

Alliance Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Northamptonshire. It is a stand-alone limited company which is part of the National Fostering Agency group. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term and parent and child placements.

The agency provided placements for 100 children in 69 fostering households on 31 March 2014. It received 32 applications to be approved as a fostering household during the year April 2013 to March 2014.

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: **outstanding**.

Alliance Foster Care is an outstanding independent fostering agency which meets the complex individual needs of children and young people exceptionally well. As a result, they settle well, are safe, make secure attachments and thrive. The agency provides a significant amount of high-quality direct work with children and young people. This includes work by the supervising social workers as well as the support worker. This is instrumental in supporting improved outcomes and exceptional progress, including sustaining placements that are at risk of breaking down, significant improved behaviour in school and emotional stability. Carers and stakeholders recognise the value of this work and speak highly of it. One stakeholder

commented: 'The agency shows a high level of professionalism and commitment I rarely see. All effort was made to ensure the young person remained in school to avoid a permanent exclusion.'

The agency has a comprehensive understanding of the needs of children requiring fostering placements and is able to recruit, prepare, assess and train a range of skilled foster carers to meet those needs. One stakeholder said of the carers, 'I have nothing but good to say.' Social workers describe the levels of care provided by some foster carers as 'exceptional' and the carers as 'fantastic'. The number of filled placements is 57%, which is in line with the national comparators for independent fostering agencies and a slight increase on the previous year's figure of 53%. Recruitment activity has also increased: at 31 March 2013 the service had 121 approved foster carers in 65 households, offering 158 places. This had increased at 31 March 2014 to 173 places in 69 fostering households.

Foster carers feel valued and part of the team around the child. There are regular supervision visits, some of which are unannounced, and annual reviews are carried out by an independent chairperson. These mechanisms provide an appropriate degree of both challenge and support to ensure carers are working safely and in the best interests of the children in their care.

Consultation with carers and children and young people is promoted to a high degree and is used to support the development of the agency. Carers comment that the manager and responsible individual listen to their views and act upon them. The agency is extremely child-focused, and children's views, achievements and involvement are highly valued.

Partnership working is a further strength; the agency has excellent and effective relationships with social workers, commissioners and other stakeholders to promote the best interests of the children and young people. Children's social workers have said supervising social workers are 'spot on' and comment how much they enjoy working with them.

Leaders and managers know the children and young people very well and regularly monitor the progress they are making. They are exceptionally committed and care deeply about the service they are providing. They are accessible and approachable for carers, staff, and children and young people. They are ambitious for the service and continually want to improve and develop. It is a learning organisation, which is able to demonstrate the progress it has made since the last inspection, including learning from complaints and other issues.

One shortfall has been identified as a result of this inspection, which relates to the written record of the decision-making process and has no impact on children or young people.

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 the agency decision maker complies with the statutory guidance when making the decision. (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services paragraph 5.40)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people have access to a child-friendly, good quality, informative profile of their foster family prior to moving in. Although the agency always sends this to the local authority prior to placement, it cannot guarantee that local authorities pass this on to the children and young people, and some children commented that they did not receive enough information prior to their placement. Carers demonstrate their awareness of the importance of good transitions to their homes, for example, by spending time with babies in hospital prior to placement to enable the baby to get used to them. Children and young people are cared for very well and their needs are fully met by their carers, with additional support where necessary. They are safe, happy and develop very positive attachments to their foster families. Many placements develop into permanent arrangements where this meets the assessed needs of the child. Carers comment that the young people have 'done amazingly well'.

The agency has experienced a small number of unplanned endings of placements this year, amounting to approximately 5% of the placements made, compared with 7% nationally; however, the agency can demonstrate it does all it can to sustain placements, and carers carry on for as long as possible to enable the local authority to make suitable alternative arrangements. Unplanned endings have generally been as a result of insufficient information about the full extent of children's needs and behaviour, safety issues, or unpredictable life events in foster families.

Children and young people experience a wide range of opportunities while living with their foster families. They engage in activities such as: horse riding; swimming; singing; theatre groups; join local clubs; go on family holidays and enjoy days out. As a result, they develop friendships, become a part of the community, develop a wide range of skills, and experience an increase in self-confidence. They are clearly treated as part of the foster family and benefit from these positive relationships. They also maintain contact with members of their birth family where this meets their assessed needs. This ensures they maintain their sense of positive identity and belonging.

Children and young people express their wishes and feelings in a number of ways. They have access to independent reviewing officers, independent advocacy services and their own social workers. Additionally, they see the foster carers' supervising social worker regularly and are asked to contribute to their foster carers' annual

reviews. They engage in a number of social events run by the agency, at which they are encouraged to express their views in an informal way. Birth children of foster carers have groups which they can attend, and the group for older birth children also includes foster children for part of the day. Supervising social workers have, on occasion, encouraged children to contact children's rights services when the children have been unhappy about their care plan.

Children and young people learn to take responsibility for their own behaviour and are generally well supported when issues such as drug misuse or going missing arise so that risk-taking behaviour reduces. They are aware of what constitutes a healthy lifestyle and are supported to achieve this, including emotional support. Some disabled children have made exceptional progress in both their physical, social and emotional development. Social workers have commented on 'significant progress', 'remarkable improvement', and children, 'transforming tremendously well'.

All the children and young people are in some form of education, including those over 16 who are not in employment. Some young people have made excellent progress, both in their attendance and achievement. For example, school attendance for one young person had increased from 40% to 100% and for another from 17% to 100%. One young person had increased attainment by two levels in six months. Young people learn independent living skills to enable them to move into their own accommodation if this is what they want once they become 18 years old. The support worker provides a comprehensive skills programme to assist with this where required. Some young people choose to remain with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements so their transition into adulthood remains stable.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency has an excellent track record of recruiting a diverse range of foster carers to meet the complex and challenging needs of the children and young people it places. Most children are over five years old and a significant number have some form of disability, be it physical, learning or emotional.

A significant strength of the agency is its matching process. Carers comment that they are under no pressure to take placements, and the placements officer has a robust and thorough knowledge of the carers, supported by the agency's supervising social workers, with whom she liaises. There are good systems for working with local authorities to obtain information about children, which results in good matches being made. The child placement agreement form is comprehensive and addresses matching issues and identifies potential gaps, which then leads to additional services being identified. This includes a diversity plan, if a child's cultural needs differ from that of the carers. The positive working relationships do not lead to collusion, however, and the agency will challenge local authorities if their practice falls below that which is expected, and has done so. Carers commented that staff do not collude with the local authority and 'fight our corner'.

The Skills to Foster training, the assessment process and the subsequent support

and additional training ensure that foster carers have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of the children placed with them, and the right skills and knowledge to meet those needs. Assessments are analytical and timely. Foster carers demonstrate a thorough understanding of their role, including the limits of their delegated authority, and that of the agency and the child's local authority. A young person commented: 'I couldn't ask for better people to care for me, they are perfect.'

Foster carers are very aware of the importance of enabling a foster child to settle in to the family and feel happy and secure. Social workers were full of praise about their practice in this regard. Foster carers are also excellent at working with members of the birth family and demonstrate significant empathy, enabling the young people they care for to have a better understanding of their situation. For example, members of the birth family attend reviews at the foster carers' house and are invited to social events.

Foster carer training and supervision are aspects of the service which have improved since the last inspection. All carers now achieve the training, support and development standards within one year of approval, which was not the case at the previous inspection, resulting in a recommendation at that time. Carers comment that the agency is very flexible and responsive to their requests for training which they identify as being helpful for current or future placements. One carer said: 'All the courses are aimed at children we have.' Another carer commented: 'They will put on training if you are interested in something.'

The agency supports carers and children in a number of ways. It has a comprehensive out-of-hours service which carers find invaluable, responsive and effective in addressing their needs. It liaises with local authorities and external services to provide specialist support, it provides direct work with children and young people, and carers themselves are excellent advocates for the children and young people they care for. Carers are very enthusiastic about the support and its impact on the care they can provide. One carer said: 'I could not have got through it without the support of the supervising social worker.' Another carer commented: 'The agency is absolutely superb; the staff are brilliant, the support fantastic and truly professional. Nothing is too much trouble. The support is outstanding.' Foster carers say that the agency is there whenever they need it and they are, 'encouraged and supported to carry on', and, 'the support is really amazing'. Carers find the support with education really helpful as the agency has a dedicated worker who ensures that children and young people have appropriate educational packages and support. This worker also undertakes direct work with young people on a range of issues, including self-harm, challenging behaviour, independence skills and personal care. There has been exceptional progress as a result of the intervention.

The fostering panel provides an effective quality assurance function to support safe and secure placements. The central list is currently being expanded as the agency recognises that it needs more diversity to reflect the current needs. The panel chair is experienced, knowledgeable and provides effective leadership in encouraging members to challenge and rigorously consider approvals, reviews and deregistration. The panel administration is very efficient and members receive the papers in good time so they can give them their full consideration. Decision making is similarly

prompt and effective, and although the process is rigorous, the written record of the decision does not reflect this in line with statutory guidance.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people are safe and protected from harm because the agency places a high priority on robust safeguarding practices. Foster carers receive a range of safeguarding training, which starts during their Skills to Foster preparation course and continues during their time as carers. This includes recent and relevant information about children missing from care, child sexual exploitation and internet safety. This is supplemented by written guidance in their handbook so carers have immediate access to information about how to respond to disclosures or safeguarding concerns. Carers demonstrate a robust understanding and knowledge of these issues and their responsibilities as foster carers. They understand the impact of children's previous experiences and how these may influence their behaviour. One social worker commented: 'The carers keep in mind the trauma the child has experienced so they do not resent the child for the difficult behaviour.' Another professional commended the foster carers for helping a young person 'make sense' of their previous experiences, in addition to providing reassurance, access to specialist support and making them feel safe. Access to consultation and training, from the psychotherapist with whom the agency has a contract, is also instrumental in aiding this understanding.

Placement planning is comprehensive and addresses all aspects of risk. Safe care plans are individual to each child or young person and based on a robust understanding of the impact of previous experiences. These are implemented and regularly reviewed in line with presenting and assessed risks. Children and young people take age-appropriate risks to enable them to develop their own understanding of how to keep themselves safe. This is further supported by direct work with some young people, including about safe use of social networking sites. Children and young people have access to a range of adults with whom to raise any concerns or issues. They have good relationships with the foster carers' supervising social workers, who ensure they see both foster children and birth children alone on a proportion of their visits so they can develop a meaningful relationship. Children and young people also see their own social workers and independent reviewing officers; they have access to the complaints procedure and attend groups and social events run by the agency. Unannounced visits take place at least once a year and follow a clear format so that they are consistently implemented.

The incidences of children and young people going missing are currently rare. However, the agency takes a proactive and robust stance in its actions to address such incidents. For example, it contacts the relevant local authority to ensure that the local protocol is followed and challenges any lack of response. As a result, carers feel supported and clear about how to minimise risk to the children and young people they are caring for. The agency has an extremely robust system for staff recruitment and is able to demonstrate, through its well-organised and systematic

approach, that appropriate checks are carried out to ensure that staff are suitable to work with children and young people. Likewise, members of the central list are appropriately recruited and vetted. The agency demonstrates a robust awareness of the actions to take if any allegations are made against either foster carers or staff and has implemented these in practice to ensure that appropriate action is taken to safeguard children and young people. Foster carers have access to independent support if they are the subject of an allegation, although the agency is mindful that the primary focus is to protect and support the child or young person. Carers are promptly deregistered if there are concerns that they are no longer appropriate to care for children.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Leaders and managers are passionate about the work of the agency and committed to providing a service of excellent quality, with positive outcomes for children and young people being at its heart. There were two recommendations made as a result of the previous inspection. These have been met in full; all foster carers are now trained to the appropriate standard within 12 months of approval, and unannounced visits are only carried out by qualified staff. This has further promoted children's and young people's welfare and safety. Additionally, as a result of the inspirational, ambitious and innovative practice, significant improvements have been made so that children and young people make good or exceptional progress and have positive experiences and outcomes. Staff commented that there have been 'massive improvements' since the last inspection and say they have 'fantastic management', and, 'carer involvement has increased significantly'. The manager has made a significant difference through reviewing and improving systems, and ensuring that the views of staff, carers and children are used and valued. Likewise, the responsible individual knows the service well and is fully committed to enhancing quality through placement stability.

Leaders and managers have exceptionally positive and highly effective working relationships with partner agencies. One commissioner commented: 'They are up to date with our needs for sufficiency and very much keep abreast of this.' Another commissioner said: 'They tick all the boxes. They are proactive, they do what they say they will do and feedback is very positive.' Clear managerial arrangements result in communication that is regular and effective. This ensures that appropriate families are available to meet the needs of the children whom the local authorities need to place.

Children and young people have excellent opportunities to express their views, have fun and develop positive relationships with their community. The latter is exemplified in the impressive contribution which children and young people make in the charitable work in which the wider agency engages. One example of this is their engagement with chefs to produce a cookbook, the proceeds of which support a national charity. Young people clearly had a lot of fun but additionally it enabled them to give something back to society and thus enhanced their self-esteem and

sense of worth and value.

Children and young people influence their day-to-day care as they are involved in foster carers' annual reviews, where their views are sought by the independent chair. They are also involved in social events and discussion groups, some of which include the birth children of foster carers, in recognition of the significant role they play. A recent event involved children expressing their views about what makes a good foster carer, the results of which are displayed in the agency's entrance hall. Photographs of events, achievements, pictures painted by children and expressions of their views, are displayed throughout the agency's premises: this promotes children's sense of belonging to, and engagement with, the agency. Young people have produced a DVD which is used when recruiting new staff, as a way of engaging them in this important aspect of the agency.

Leaders and managers have excellent systems for monitoring, which include tracking the progress and outcomes for children and young people. This is reflected in the expressed views of stakeholders and carers, who consistently comment that managers and staff know the children and carers very well. Managers see them regularly, record their progress and implement additional support to promote improved outcomes. The manager provides detailed and analytical monthly reports to the senior managers which give an honest appraisal of how the agency is progressing. The annual report is similarly thorough, analytical and self-critical and used as a tool to drive improvement.

Carers comment very positively on consultation with them and feel their views are taken seriously and result in improvements. They have a number of ways of influencing the service, including supervision visits, annual reviews, support groups and consultation events. For example, they have influenced an improved training schedule and an increase in the number of support groups. The responsible individual demonstrates a very impressive knowledge of the agency, including how individual children and young people are progressing. He acknowledges exceptional progress by sending letters of praise and encouragement to young people. He is also a visible presence at the annual consultation event for carers, thus enabling carers to express their views directly to him.

The Statement of Purpose gives clear information about the agency and is readily available on the website. The agency has a number of children's guides, devised with the involvement of the young people, so that information is available in appropriate formats, so they can know what to expect from the service. The Foster Carers' Charter is implemented in practice, as carers are seen as part of the team and their views are canvassed and valued. Complaints are seen in a positive light and as a way of improving practice. The agency notifies the relevant agencies in a timely way and takes appropriate action in response to these notifications.

There is a systematic approach to recruiting carers which is reviewed regularly to ensure effective methods are being used to attract carers with the right skills and qualities to meet the needs of the children. An enthusiastic, insightful and committed carer recruitment officer values quality over quantity of carers to promote placement

stability and positive outcomes. Retention of carers is good, but the manager has clear oversight of this and uses her development plan to sustain and improve upon the number of placements provided. Staff are appropriately qualified and extremely committed to providing excellent support to children and families. They are supported through access to good training, regular supervision and reflective practice, including consultation sessions with the psychotherapist. The agency is committed to supporting, valuing and developing staff, for example, through amending working hours or supporting access to professional qualifications. One social worker commented, 'I only had to ask', in relation to accessing a specialist course to enhance his practice with families.

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.