

# Abacus Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Setting address</b>	Suite 111, Steward Street Lofts, 69 Stewards Street, Birmingham, West Midlands, B18 7AF
<b>Telephone number</b>	0121 456 0717
<b>Email</b>	admin@abacusfostering.co.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Abacus Fostering Limited
<b>Registered manager</b>	Natasha Linda Bland
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Barbara Annette Morrison
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	04/04/2013

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## Service information

### Brief description of the service

The fostering agency is a private limited company which registered in 2013. The volume of recruitment since 2013 is six carer households, one of which has now resigned. There are currently five carer households approved with three children and young people in placement. The remit of the service is to provide respite, short and long-term placements for children and young people between the ages of 0-21 years. The service consists of a small team of social workers who complete assessments of carers, complete the training and approval process, and make and support placements.

### 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**.

The fostering agency has made a successful start because all the children and young people placed are having their needs met. Children and young people's needs are various and complex, yet they make good, and in some instances outstanding, progress. A particular strength of the agency is the recruitment and preparation of skilled carers who are then well matched with children and young people. Carers have developed safe and secure relationships with children and young people. They thrive as a result. All matches have been successful and there have been no unplanned endings to placements. However, any comparisons with national trends cannot be relevantly made in such as small, new service.

Carers benefit from particularly supportive and challenging relationships with the agency supervising social workers. This includes high quality training and individualised visiting programmes from agency staff who are up-to-date and well briefed on developments in fostering. As a result, carers are confident, but not complacent. Carers' own knowledge, insights and experience of children and young people informs planning and decision making and has impressed placing social workers, birth families, teachers and independent reviewing officers (IROs).

The leadership of the agency is visible and effective in all its work. Electronic systems are used well and underpin timely and appropriate action in all areas of recording, planning and safeguarding. As a result, children and young people are well protected and relationships are good with partner organisations. Breaches of fostering regulations and minimum standards are minor and reflect oversights in what is still a small, new agency. They have no impact on the good quality safeguarding or promotion of children's welfare that are demonstrated.

## 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 a copy of the statement of purpose is provided the chief inspector and placed on the provider's website. (Regulation 3 (2))	29/08/2014

### Recommendations

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

- ensure that the fostering service provider's decision maker's decision is made within seven working days of receipt of the recommendation and final set of panel minutes (NMS 14.9)
- ensure that the views of the child, the child's family, social worker and independent reviewing officer are sought regularly on the child's care (unless in individual cases this is not appropriate) (NMS 1.4)
- ensure that procedures for monitoring serious incidents, allegations, complaints and service quality are effective to identify shortfalls and inform development planning for the service (NMS 25.1)

- ensure that foster carers maintain an ongoing training and development portfolio which demonstrates how they are meeting the skills required of them by the fostering service. This particularly relates to completing initial child protection training, safer caring, contact and home safety and hygiene. (NMS 20.4)

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

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Children and young people benefit from good quality introductions to their carers, including visits and pictorial information before they move in. Information is provided in suitable formats, such as picture exchange communication system (PECS), where children have complex learning disabilities. A social worker said the agency were 'very proactive to make sure the introductions were of good quality.' As a result, children and young people settle well into their foster homes and have a good understanding of how their foster carers will look after them. One young person commented that her placement for respite support is 'way better' than placements with other agencies which she previously had.

Children and young people maintain very positive relationships with their birth families, yet make progress and gain confidence in their foster placements. This is because carers demonstrate skill and understanding about the importance of birth family relationships, especially where the care plan is for respite and/or return home. For example, a social worker said one young person 'has come on leaps and bounds - is more confident, his skin is clearer, he seems more relaxed because carers reassured him that he will be able to return home and he has developed positive relationships.' Similarly, other children continue to have regular contact during court proceedings and young people take their enthusiasm and life skills back home to help their aging relatives. An IRO said: 'They understand the value of contact for young people living away from their parents and do all they can to promote safe and enjoyable meetings.'

Children and young people have a wide range of opportunities and support which helps them achieve the best outcomes. They make significant progress in their emotional wellbeing, physical health and learning. This is because carers wholeheartedly invest their time. For example, carers regularly go to the gym with young people and invest quality time, talking and listening to them. They make plans and talk about holidays, so that young people see a future.

Children with complex needs and communication difficulties make outstanding progress. For example, one child is now much more engaged in trying to communicate: using many more signs and trying to say and make sounds. He is able to shower and use a toothbrush. He has begun to run, walk and trampoline, where before he was inactive, unmotivated and averse to self-care routines. He won a school award for the pupil who made the best personal progress. The IRO stated: 'There has been a remarkable improvement in all aspects of the young person's behaviour, appearance and achievement since he moved to live with these carers.'

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The fostering agency has recruited a range of foster carers who can meet the diverse needs of children and young people who are looked after, or who receive a short breaks service. The agency's assessments are completed in a timely manner and they thoroughly explore new carers' aptitude, insight and resilience for the fostering task. The fostering panel promotes thorough assessments, support and training and carries out a rigorous quality assurance function. Training includes initial foster carer training and the 'training and development standards' (TDS). All training is of good quality and provides carers with an in-depth understanding of children living away from their families. As a result, carers are challenged, yet also feel valued for the quality of their contribution. One carer said: 'The agency is outstanding in people skills and gives the right people the chance to care for those who need it the most.' However, some key training has not been completed by carers. This is because 'home training packs' covering topics, such as, initial child protection training, safer caring, contact and home safety and hygiene, have not been completed by carers despite reminders from the agency. Children and young people have not been adversely affected by this because other training, fortnightly visits and weekly phone calls from the agency have ensured carers have all necessary resources to provide high quality care.

Carers' comments following training demonstrate their acquired skills and knowledge. They mention: 'keep the child at the centre'; 'understand the impact of past abuse'; 'give praise and understand the impact of trauma on children's ability to learn'; 'think of the impact of my own behaviour on the child's behaviour'; 'try to identify and eliminate triggers'; and 'assess situations and look for what's underlying it.' As a result, professionals in the team around the child are impressed by the quality of service. For example, an IRO said: 'I have been very impressed with the skills and knowledge of the carers. Quite simply it has begun to transform the life chances of the young person, already the improvement in his presentation and achievement is remarkable.'

Children and young people benefit from the professional and supportive relationships that carers have with the agency and children's social workers. One carer said: 'As a company you are unique as we have been treated like family and been supported every inch of the way.' Good organisation, child-centred planning, and good communication promote each child and young person's safety and well-being in the placement. For example, carers and supporting social workers make good use of electronic mail and recording systems to ensure that the details of incidents, issues, delegated authority and changing plans, are shared and known. This helps ensure that children and young people's contact visits with family are successful and that their participation in meetings and fun activities is maximised. Carers write good quality reports for each child's review meeting. Supervising social workers demonstrate an ability to communicate directly and establish positive relationships with children and young people. All these strengths promote children and young people's progress and give placing social workers high levels of confidence in the

quality and responsiveness of the agency.

## **Safeguarding children and young people**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The protection of children and young people is central to the work of the agency and is understood well by carers and agency staff. An IRO commented that 'carers have a strong grasp of safeguarding issues.'

Carers demonstrate a clear understanding of unsafe behaviours and how behaviour might link to attachment difficulties, the frustrations of communication and learning disabilities, and/or past experiences of abuse. Carers use practical, individualised safe-care procedures, such as being appropriately dressed and allocating personal space. They provide attention and care which does not shy away from appropriate touch for hands and face, and appropriate hugs. Carers ensure that children's personal care needs are met in a way that protects children's dignity, limits their vulnerability, and promotes their independence. They also ensure that care protects children from the possibility of abuse and protects carers, so far as possible, from allegation. This combination of skills in practice successfully helps children and young people gain self-control, display appropriate behaviour and reduce unsafe behaviour, such as going missing, and aggressive outbursts. For example, children with learning disabilities have stopped running off and previous behaviours of biting, pinching, spitting and punching are massively reduced. Children are making small steps towards continence and have overcome a fear of water. Overall, they are therefore less vulnerable and are taking steps towards keeping themselves safer.

Agency staff provide a good balance of support and vigilance to carers and children. Supervising social workers make up to three unannounced visits to carers each year; check the home and bedrooms for suitability and safety; and ensure that children and young people are seen without their carers. This robust professional curiosity ensures that children and young people are well safeguarded. It is also welcomed by carers within the context of a supportive, yet child-centred professional relationship. All children and young people know how to complain and are able to contact their social workers and IROs because the agency ensures they are provided with this information in a suitable format that they can understand. Supervising social workers are particularly skilled at communicating with children and young people, tailoring their approach according to children's needs. For example, as a result of patiently using her own PECS pictures and social work skills, a child with learning disabilities and no speech is able to stay comfortably alone with the supervising social worker and can sign how he is feeling.

All staff, carer and panel member recruitment is thorough and complies with statutory requirements. Together, the agency and panel staff ensure that assessment, preparation and training of carers has a very strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. Carers are well taught about the importance of useable, up to date risk assessments, safe care plans and of timely sharing of all incidents. Robust action is always taken in the event of an allegation, even when it

might seem minor. There is immediate referral to local authority child protection services and the agency also protects and supports the children, young people and carers involved. As a result, children and young people are well safeguarded and unnecessary placement moves are not made.

## **Leadership and management**

Judgement outcome: **good**.

Leaders and managers have succeeded in developing very effective working relationships with placing local authorities and social workers in particular. Managers say their key strengths lie in the range of good quality carers whom they are assessing and in their ability to make good matches which promote safe placements where children thrive. Commissioners have been impressed by the clarity of the agency's understanding of the needs of each child that has been matched with carers. Equally, placing social workers comment on the consistency of agency and carer attendance at team around the child meetings; the efficiency with reports and documentation; and the agency's availability for discussion about any concerns. In addition, the agency has taken specific action to ensure that children and young people's needs are best met through working responsively with education, child and adult mental health services, and parents. As a result, children and young people are being cared for in line with their plans and are making very good progress towards their goals.

Leaders and managers are highly effective users of a computerised system specifically for fostering agencies. As a small, newly developing agency, they are extensively using the functionality of the system to promote best communication, good safeguarding and high quality record keeping. As a result, the agency has a full and up to date picture of how each child is progressing and the quality of carers' and staff's work. In addition to this, managers have a good awareness of developments in fostering practice and also of the inspection framework, national minimum standards and regulations. For example, leaders and managers are alert to significant events, send notifications to Ofsted as appropriate, and take appropriate follow-up action. Leaders and managers also currently play an intrinsic role in the assessment and training of carers. They gain detailed feedback about carers' learning and about the fostering panel's views on the quality of assessment and preparation work. They utilise the messages from this feedback to continuously improve the service and to contribute to annual quality and data performance reports.

Monthly reports are prepared by the Registered Manager and are considered by the leadership team. Reports consider service development as well as some learning from incidents and identified shortfalls. In addition, the registered individual audits records to promote consistently good recording. The annual Ofsted survey report has been shared and used across the service, providing positive feedback for this inspection. However, the views of children and young people, their carers and parents are not regularly gained and analysed as part of manager monitoring activity. While the agency is still small, leaders receive feedback on an ad hoc basis and a recent activity day was cancelled due to adverse weather. In addition, minor



and/or occasional shortfalls have gone unnoticed under present monitoring. For example, the agency has not published the Statement of Purpose on its website where parents and others can easily view it. In addition, one instance has occurred where the agency decision maker failed to communicate their registration decision to new carers within timescales. While carers did not complain about this, they were under the mistaken impression that the panel's recommendation some weeks before was, in fact, a decision. These shortfalls have not had an adverse impact on children or young people.

## 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.