

Affinity Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Affinity Fostering is a small independent fostering agency. It was first registered in September 2013 and is based near Chelmsford, Essex.

At the time of the inspection, Affinity Fostering supported 25 foster carers with 30 single placements and 3 parent and child placements. The agency provides short term; long term, permanency; respite and parent and child placements. Emergency placements can also be provided. The service also offers placements for disabled children and young people and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

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**.

Children and young people have their individual needs consistently met to an exceptionally high standard. There is a clear focus on ensuring that their welfare is safeguarded at all times, with carers demonstrating high levels of competence and skill in this area. From their starting points, children and young people make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives.

The agency has approved a wide range of carers, able to meet the diverse and specific needs of children and young people. Children thrive in their placements and all those spoken with during the inspection felt safe and exceptionally well

supported. They attribute the progress they have made to the care provided by their carers and the staff from the agency.

The quality of assessments and recruitment of foster carers is excellent. Assessments are carried out in a very timely manner and presented to panel. The agency has approved a wide range of very experienced and capable carers who are able to meet the agency's statement of purpose aims and objectives.

All carers report feeling part of a team, working to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children and young people placed with them. Practices of all staff are innovative and enable children and young people to succeed in their placements to a consistently high standard. Carers receive excellent support from agency staff, extensive training opportunities and report high levels of support for their own birth children. The agency places great emphasis on continuous learning to improve practice. Agency staff and carers receive a wide range of training and development opportunities, to enhance and increase their existing skills.

A particular strength of the agency is its engagement with children and young people on all aspects of the care provided to them. Meaningful consultation and participation underpins all aspects of the work done to support them. All agency staff and carers have undertaken recent training with a nationally recognised agency, to consider participation of children and young people. This has led to the formation of a participation policy and strategy, with the full engagement of carers and children placed with them.

All involved agencies report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction at the care and support provided to children and young people. Placing authorities, independent reviewing officers and commissioners all praise the agency managers, staff and carers for their skills, competence and ability to turn around the lives of children and young people with very complex needs.

The agency advocates for all children and young people to ensure their holistic needs are met at all times. They work closely with their carers to ensure that relevant and up to date information is obtained and that care and placement plans continue to meet identified and changing needs. The Registered Manager has extensive experience and skills in this area of work and provides inspirational leadership to a dedicated and committed team of social workers and foster carers.

No shortfalls or breaches of regulations have been identified as a result of this inspection.

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people receive clear and user-friendly information about their carers, prior to moving in. This includes photographs of the carers and their family members, any pets they have and their home and local area. Children and young

people spoken with during the inspection all reported having very well planned moves to their placements, with lots of useful information being provided to them. They feel that this helped them to make the transition smoothly and that it reduced their anxieties.

Children and young people benefit from exceptionally stable placements. The agency ensures that they maintain contact with family members and significant others. Carers fully understand the care plans for children placed with them, their histories and reasons for being in care. They demonstrate high levels of sensitivity in meeting the needs of children and young people. This includes asking a child placed with them what they would like to call them, reflecting the need to reduce the stigma some looked after children and young people feel. One foster carer stated that she and her foster child had agreed that she would be referred to as his aunt when out in public, as she did not look like his birth parent. This attention to detail makes children feel safe and valued.

The agency has proactively supported some children and young people to remain in their placements on a permanent basis. The Registered Manager has also recently supported one set of carers to secure a prospective adoption placement of two siblings. This was done in a highly imaginative way, with the Registered Manager identifying a possible match for her carers through the British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF). The agency has also enabled two siblings to be placed together with one set of foster carers for the first time in their care history. This reflects the total commitment of the agency staff and carers to placing the needs of children and young people at the centre of their work.

All children and young people placed with this agency have educational provision in place. Carers and agency staff have worked hard to ensure that a high value is placed on education. For some children and young people, this is the first time that they have engaged in formal education. Carers attend parent's evenings and meetings, they display certificates of achievements in their homes and the agency also sends out congratulation cards and vouchers to support such achievements. Educational attendance and attainment is excellent for all children placed with this agency. Some young people are in the process of moving onto further education courses, some will be undertaking apprenticeships and others have aspirations to go to university.

Carers support children and young people placed with them to access and enjoy a wide range of social activities. This promotes and develops their social skills and confidence. Educational providers consistently comment in reports of how well children and young people have done, both academically and socially. Some young people become prefects in school or take part in lunch and after school clubs. They enjoy regular and positive contact with family members and friends. Where appropriate, carers attend parent's evenings and other meetings with birth parents and invite them to visit their child in the carer's home. Children are supported to have friends and siblings for sleepovers, in line with agreed contact plans. This further promotes their sense of identity and value.

A particular strength of the agency is its commitment to eliciting the wishes, views and feelings of all children and young people placed. The agency has recently completed training with an organisation run by and for young people who are in or leaving care. The focus of this training was participation and engagement of looked after children in all aspects of their lives. From this training, children and young people have been assisting the agency's participation and activity leader to devise and launch a young person's handbook. The agency also intends to provide workshops and training for children and young people, to assist them with their recruitment processes. All children and young people met with during the inspection reported exceptionally high levels of satisfaction on the consultation and engagement with them by all agency staff.

Children and young people lead healthy lives, supported by their carers. The agency also employs the services of a drugs awareness worker, a health and well-being consultant and a qualified counsellor. This enables carers and agency staff to provide prompt and specialist support for children and young people who may require it. For some young people, this has enabled them to have 1:1 support on drugs misuse in a very timely manner. One young person stated; 'I have managed to stop taking drugs for several weeks now and am being supported by a drugs worker from the agency. I really feel supported by my carers and the agency to consider my drugs misuse'.

The agency has also sourced specific training for carers and staff on child sexual exploitation recently, in order to meet the needs of young people at risk. This enabled carers to respond to a young person's needs with confidence and skills and for agency staff to also undertake some direct work with a young person to promote their welfare and safety. The local authority work closely with the agency to monitor and agree any changes needed to the care plans for such vulnerable young people.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency has recruited a range of foster carers, able to meet the complex and often challenging needs of children and young people. The agency has an excellent record of placement stability to date, with no unplanned endings. This reflects both the thoroughness of the assessment process for carers and the attention to placement matching. The agency also employs the services of a training consultant, an education consultant, a drugs awareness worker, qualified counsellor, health and wellbeing consultant and a participation and activities leader. This provides specialist help and support to children and young people for as long as it is needed.

Carers working for this agency undergo intensive and rigorous assessments prior to approval. Following approval, they receive intensive support from agency staff to support them in their roles. Training and development opportunities reflect the agency's commitment to supporting its carers to be able to provide the best possible care to children and young people. Parent and child placement carers have been financially supported by the agency to undertake specialist training in parenting assessments. Such training has led to a recent positive outcome for one parent, with

the court's agreeing a rehabilitation plan. One carer commented; 'training and support is second to none, this is a smaller agency than some and the feeling of continuity, every member of staff knowing you personally, is lovely and very important to us as a family. The agency is like having an extended family and there are always people available for support.'

Carers display a high commitment to children, young people and parents placed with them. They have received training on placement endings by the qualified counsellor, child sexual exploitation and behaviour management, as well as many other relevant courses. The agency also sends out a monthly email to all staff and carers, which details relevant resources, research and changes to legislation and statutory guidance. Carers report feeling exceptionally well supported to develop their skills and experiences. One foster carer is being funded by the agency currently to undertake sign language training. All carers feel that if they have any specific training or development needs, that the agency staff will support this. All foster carers have completed their training, support and development standards within the required timescales.

Foster carers work closely and positively with placing authorities and other involved agencies, to ensure the holistic needs of children are met at all times. One placement officer for a local authority stated that carers for one young person; 'went above and beyond what I would have expected them to do, there was nothing more they could do to support the young person.' Carers have access to an out of hour's service for support, run by agency staff. Carers report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction at this service. One carer stated that she had to attend a police station once in the early hours of the morning. A social worker from the agency came with her to offer support. All carers report similar examples of how agency staff and managers 'go the extra mile' to support them.

The fostering panel is robust and challenges the agency appropriately and effectively. Minutes from panel meetings reflect the wide range of skills and experience panel members have. The central list includes members from health, education, foster carers, social workers, care leavers, probation and police. The chair of the panel is exceptionally well qualified and experienced and provides a clear and robust lead for panel members. The panel administrator has excellent systems in place and ensures that minutes are provided to the agency decision maker within two days of a panel taking place. Panel members have all undergone detailed induction training and attended a number of courses with agency staff and carers. At some panels, prospective foster carers have been supported to bring their own family members and looked after children with them to meet panel members. This very imaginative practice further promotes the participation and engagement of carer's birth children and looked after children.

The agency works extremely closely with placing social workers and independent reviewing offices to ensure that all plans are reviewed within timescale. The agency has excellent systems in place to monitor and track looked after reviews for all children and young people placed with carers. Agency staff ensure that they take comprehensive notes when attending any reviews or meetings, to avoid any potential

delay in responding to identified actions, whilst waiting for the official minutes. The agency ensures that at the time of a placement starting, delegated authority arrangements are clearly agreed and recorded. This ensures that children and young people are not disadvantaged at any time.

The support and practice of agency staff and carers has led to sustained improvements for children and young people over time. An independent training consultant who works with this agency stated; 'The managers are passionate about promoting good positive outcomes for children and young people and believe that by offering support, training and other opportunities to carers, then this will reflect on the standard of care given to the young people. They also create various opportunities for the promotion of education as well as training and support to foster carers to ensure that young people are prepared for their transition to adulthood.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Children and young people know how to make a complaint and receive detailed information on the agency's procedures prior to moving into placement. All those spoken with during the inspection reported feeling very safe with their carers and able to raise any issues of concern they may have. They report that both their carers and agency staff listen to their views at all times and respond to their needs in a timely manner. There have been no reported complaints since the agency was registered last year.

Carers actively support young people to take age-appropriate risks, in line with agreed risk assessments and care plans. Over time, young people learn how to take personal responsibility for their actions and behaviours. From their starting points, children and young people have made significant improvements in this area, as reported on by numerous educational establishments and other involved agencies. Carers have a detailed understanding and awareness of the agency and local authority policies and procedures and follow these diligently. This is particularly evident in relation to missing incidents and child sexual exploitation.

The agency has proactively sourced training opportunities for all staff, to ensure their continuing awareness and skills in working with children and young people who may display concerning or risk-taking behaviours. This has led to significant improvements in relation to missing incidents, drug misuse and sexual exploitation. Children and young people feel included in all aspects of their care and how their carers and the agency will ensure their safety and well-being. Direct work has been undertaken with some children and young people on such areas as sexual exploitation and drugs use, leading to marked reductions in such concerning behaviours.

The agency ensures that all staff and carers fully understand the placement plans and risk assessments for each child placed. Excellent matching and consideration of individual needs prior to placement, ensures that carers are well prepared and able to meet the complex needs of looked after children placed with them. The agency

has excellent systems in place to monitor and review all plans and risk assessments, leading to continual improvements in relation to the safety of all children and young people.

Agency staff and carers have access to all relevant policies and procedures relating to safeguarding via the agency's very comprehensive website. Carers receive full training and induction prior to any placements being made, to ensure that they are fully conversant with them and able to put them into practice. Joint missing protocols with local authorities and police are rigorously followed at all times. Strategy meetings are convened to discuss any specific young people where missing or sexual exploitation is a concern. Carers and agency staff are particularly focused on ensuring that children and young people receive the support and guidance they need to ensure their personal safety. Recording of events by carers is of an exceptionally high standard and assists the agency staff and other agencies. The agency is able to quickly utilise the services of specialist providers to assist with such issues as drugs misuse, commissioning specific training for carers and offering direct work to children and young people.

The recruitment, assessment, preparation and supervision of carers is excellent and has a strong focus on safeguarding and child protection. Agency staff undertake monthly formal supervision with carers and always consider any actual or potential safeguarding issues. Records reflect clearly what action or support is needed and is reviewed at the next formal supervision session. The agency social workers undertake at least one unannounced visit to carers' homes each year. The Registered Manager and Responsible Individual also carry out annual visits to the carers. These visits are planned, but enable managers to discuss any issues carers may have and to provide management oversight of all carers and the support they receive.

The agency has very comprehensive systems in place to ensure that recruitment procedures are thorough and that all necessary checks are undertaken. This prevents unsuitable people from having the opportunity to harm children and young people. Systems ensure that all checks are regularly updated and that information held on agency staff and panel members is correct and up-to-date at all times.

Agency staff are fully aware of the whistleblowing procedures and confident that they would feel able to use them, but have not done so to date. Agency staff and carers demonstrate an excellent level of understanding and awareness of safeguarding and child protection. They display confidence in identifying and reporting any concerns to appropriate agencies and in supporting the children and young people in their care. They receive training on allegations and the role of the local authority designated officer (LADO) and feel exceptionally well supported in this area.

There have been no allegations made relating to foster carers since the agency was registered. The agency staff and managers have robust and clear systems in place to support both children and carers, in the event of an allegation being made. Policies and procedures clearly reflect the actions to be taken, in the event of an allegation being made. These are considered as part of the mandatory training carers

undertake. They are available on the agency website as well for carers to access. Carers report very high levels of satisfaction with the policies and procedures, stating; 'they are gone through us by staff when we start working for the agency. We can then access them online at any time and they are always up-to date and informative.' The agency also provides independent support to carers who may be subject to an allegation. The agency also provides membership to a national fostering support network for all carers.

A particular strength of the agency is its commitment to ensuring that all staff and carers receive information on research and practice developments each month. Aside from the bi-monthly training sessions with foster carers, they also receive a monthly email of current research, legislative changes and guidance to consider. All staff are asked to consider this and complete a record of this and to demonstrate how this has increased their knowledge and understanding and how they will use this in their roles. This enables foster carers to be confident and competent in their roles at all times and leads to significantly better progress for children and young people in all aspects of their lives.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The Registered Manager has developed exceptionally effective and positive working relationships with a wide range of placing local authorities since the agency was registered. Placing authorities and involved agencies report excellent working relationships with the manager and agency staff and total confidence in their ability to meet the specific needs of looked after children. One commissioning manager stated; 'the agency is an excellent resource and I will be recommending an on-going contractual arrangement with the agency.' Another placement officer from another placing authority stated; 'this agency is in my top 10. I find the managers and staff are all very helpful, I have every confidence in them, they always try and help us and have excellent carers.'

Children and young people placed with this agency have a wide range of opportunities provided to have fun and feel part of their local communities. The agency employs a participation and activities leader. This person organises trips and events for children, young people and birth children of carers during the holiday periods. At the time of the inspection, a trip was about to take place to a ski-slope locally for older children. Children and young people have also had a wilderness experience, with photographs and records reflecting that this was very well received. Young people report feeling very positive about their relationship with the participation and activities leader and agency administrator. They feel that they are fully consulted on about what activities and trips they would like to take part in and always enjoy them.

The Registered Manager ensures that all carers maintain detailed and comprehensive information about the achievements of all children and young people placed with them. This includes certificates of achievement for education, social activities and

any other positive progress they have made. Records reflect the highly positive progress children and young people have made since moving to live with their carers. The Registered Manager demonstrates a detailed knowledge and understanding of all children and young people placed with her carers and ensures that their successes are celebrated. Children and young people receive cards and vouchers from the agency to celebrate their successes and for birthdays and other significant achievements. One child stated; ' I love my handbook and have been given a voucher for completing work on it.'

The Registered Manager and Head of Business Services have excellent systems in place to monitor and track all aspects of the care provided to children and young people. They regularly review and monitor all aspects of the care provided and ensure that services are in place to meet the needs of all placed children. The Registered Manager has put in place robust systems to ensure the full contribution of both carers and children and young people to the annual review of the agency. She sees this as an integral part of ensuring that their services continue to provide the best possible care and support to staff and children. The agency is also employing the services of an independent person to oversee the annual review of carers this year, in order to have an independent scrutiny and oversight of their work. This reflects the dedication of the manager to ensuring that they operate in a transparent and open manner at all times. All required quality and performance data has been sent to Ofsted promptly.

The agency has a clear and detailed statement of purpose and children's guide in place. Carers, children and young people display a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the agency and report high levels of satisfaction that these are consistently met. The agency has adopted the Foster Carers' Charter and consults with its carers to ensure that there is regular review and consultation. The agency has not received any complaints to date, but has clear and robust systems in place to consider and respond to them. The agency regularly consults with children and young people about the services they provide. The agency encourages children and young people to contribute to part of carers formal supervision sessions, in order to consider their feedback and views. This reflects the agency's commitment to continual learning and improvement.

The agency has exceeded its initial plan for recruitment of carers within the first year. The Registered Manager demonstrates an excellent ability to recruit and approve highly skilled and competent carers. A large number of the agency's carers have moved to work for this agency from other agencies. This has been based on their previous experience of working with the Registered Manager of this agency. One independent training consultant stated; ' I have been working in the childcare sector for over 35 years and in that time have seen both good and bad leadership and management and I can categorically state that the standard of leadership and management at this agency is of the top grade.'

All agency staff and panel members bring a wealth of skills, experience and competence to their roles. Agency supervising social workers have specialised in this area of work for many years and display very high levels of skill and commitment.

Panel membership is diverse and includes members from within education, health, social care, probation, police and ex-care leavers. The views and contributions of carers, children and young people are sought as part of appraisals of all staff members. This also includes consultation with the birth children of carers. The agency is committed to ensuring active and meaningful participation and engagement of all involved parties in its appraisal process. This is also reflected in the very comprehensive participation policy and strategy, which has been formed following the involvement of a national organisation run by current and previously looked after young people.

The agency has ensured that all relevant notifications have been made to Ofsted and placing authorities in a very timely manner. They reflect the actions taken by agency staff and managers to support and ensure the safety and protection of children and young people. One placing authority praised the agency for its excellent communication, stating that they are always kept up-to-date with information relating to children placed with this agency.

All carers working for this agency report exceptionally high levels of satisfaction at the support they receive from managers and agency staff, including administration and finance staff. Comments from carers include; 'We have recently moved fostering agencies and have found this agency to be very supportive and always have someone at the other end of the phone to talk with to get advice, day or night.' Another carer said; 'The agency is very child focus/centred. I have found them to be very supportive and respond quickly to any concerns or issues that I may come across, they are very approachable and I feel valued.' Another stated; 'In my opinion, this agency goes above and beyond in not only supporting their foster carers but also supporting the children in their care.'

Many carers state that they specifically moved to work for this agency, due to the reputation and respect they have for the Registered Manager and Responsible Individual. The agency has an excellent reputation with a wide range of placing authorities, largely due to the inspirational leadership provided. The Registered Manager is very child-focused and dedicated to ensuring that the needs of all children and young people are met at all times. Records reflect the significant progress made by all children and young people placed with this agency, in relation to their educational attainment, sense of identity and social skills. One young person stated; 'I have had loads of foster placements before this one. This is the best by far; they are like my second parents. I would never have done so well in school and outside of it, without the support of my carers and the agency staff. There is absolutely nothing they could do better for me.'

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.