

Amicus Foster Care

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Date of last inspection	09/07/2010

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Service information

Brief description of the service

Amicus Foster Care is a small, Bristol-based private limited company which covers Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Swindon, Wiltshire, North Somerset, Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset and Somerset. The service has an office in a community centre in Bristol.

The service is governed by a board of directors, comprising the three senior managers. The Board is responsible for practice quality, strategic direction and all financial and corporate decisions.

The service currently has 31 fostering households, including 24 full time and seven respite foster homes. There are 38 looked-after children with complex needs placed with Amicus foster carers. The service currently has another three families undergoing assessment.

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**.

This service achieves outstanding outcomes for children and young people, who make exceptional progress when placed with Amicus foster families. The agency specialises in placing children with very complex needs, who may be disabled, or traumatised in early life. These children are often challenging to match and struggle

to find a permanent family. In spite of this, the vast majority of children and young people placed through Amicus develop strong, trusting relationships with their carers. Consequently, they gain the confidence to make progress in every area of their lives.

A small number of young people had entrenched difficulties prior to placement and still engage in risk-taking behaviour. These young people have still achieved positive outcomes since they came to live with Amicus carers.

The service undertakes robust, high quality assessments to recruit a diverse range of exceptional foster carers. Foster carers bring with them unique and valuable life experiences. They come from all walks of life and different cultural backgrounds, but are unified by their commitment to children. Foster carers are highly emotionally intelligent and have embraced the service's chosen model of working. They are able to make good use of the outstanding learning opportunities available to them. Skilled and resilient foster carers directly benefit children and young people, because they are able to nurture and support highly distressed children and sustain placements.

The agency has very positive working relationships with placing authorities. This results in effective communication and high quality information about children to be placed. Consequently, children's placement and care plans accurately reflect their needs and support stable, lasting placements. The service also has very positive relationships with schools and with the police, to ensure that children's educational and safeguarding needs are met. When young people take risks with their safety, the risk is managed extremely effectively. The service has shown over time that it has the knowledge and confidence to handle difficult situations calmly, with young people's best interests at heart.

Relationships between foster carers, children and the agency as a whole are exceptionally strong. The agency provides excellent quality direct work for children, young people and foster carers. Foster carers feel very well supported and have nothing but praise for the staff and service managers.

An exceptionally effective bespoke therapy service provides outstanding support for children and young people. Throughout the inspection, foster carers and staff commended the therapist's knowledge, skills and approachability, saying that her involvement provides them with fresh perspectives and inspiration.

The agency is driven by the leadership team's passion and commitment. Leaders and managers inspire creativity and service improvement. The Registered Manager is a skilled and experienced social worker, who is also a highly effective leader. The small team of directors is highly visible and closely involved in all aspects of the work.

Children and young people are at the heart of everything the agency does, and are routinely consulted about all aspects of the agency's development. Managers and staff ensure that an imaginative programme of group activities provides numerous opportunities for children and foster carers to meet informally and have fun. This creates a 'family' atmosphere. Children as well as foster carers commented on the sense of security that this brings. One young person commented, 'my carer listens to

me. I feel part of the family - wanted for the first time.' Another child said, 'my carer has made a home for me.'

Leadership and management are outstanding. Staff training and supervision is extremely well organised and effective to ensure continuous professional development. There are no breaches of regulations and the only point for development, in connection with strengthening the role of the panel administrator and further refining the quality of the minutes, had already been identified by the service as an area for improvement.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

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

- continue to improve the written minutes of panel meetings to ensure that they clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. (NMS 14.7)

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

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service delivers outstanding outcomes for children and young people, because the excellent quality of care ensures that they make exceptionally good progress in all areas. This fostering agency provides flexible, tailor-made care for children with a wide variety of highly complex individual needs. On the rare occasions when outcomes are less positive, for example, for the very small number of young people who have not yet learned to keep themselves safe, the service takes assertive action to ensure that information is shared appropriately with other relevant agencies to reduce risk as far as possible.

The agency provides exceptionally good quality written information about their foster carers to help children and placing authorities understand the service on offer. Foster carers create attractive, illustrated booklets about their families and homes, with lots of photos to help children prepare for their move. One child said, 'they are very welcoming and caring.'

Some foster carers use their skills in alternative systems of communication to prepare information in formats to suit children with special language needs. Children with limited understanding of English have access to information and reading books in their first language. This ensures that even when placements are not a direct ethnic and cultural match, that children's linguistic and religious needs can still be met, and they have every opportunity to settle into their new home.

The agency actively seeks detailed information about children to inform their care

plans and ensure that foster carers have all the knowledge that they need. This means that children's care is supported by exceptionally good quality planning and risk assessments, which cover every known aspect of their care.

Children who have had numerous previous placements and who struggle to form attachments, begin to respond to consistent, nurturing care. This has a major impact on their personal relationships both inside and outside the fostering family. One young person said, 'my foster carers help me get good friends and they are always there when I need them, even when I am in school, as they are always in my heart!'

Many children have made exceptional progress in their placements, forming positive relationships to help them achieve permanency. There have been very few placement disruptions, but when placements cannot continue, endings are still planned as far as possible to help to reduce the trauma of a further move. For example, when children move to residential care, fostering service staff visit the proposed placement and work closely with placing social workers to ensure as far as possible that it can meet the child's needs.

The vast majority of young people remain with their foster carers until they feel ready to move on. Some young people are planning to remain with their carers beyond the age of 18 years and are actively planning for this. When appropriate, foster carers are supported to pursue Special Guardianship arrangements to achieve permanency for young people.

Brothers and sisters are placed together whenever possible, in line with their local authorities' plans. When families have to be separated, the agency works hard to promote positive contact to help young people to keep in touch with members of their wider family. This helps to ensure that children and young people develop their sense of identity and maintain important links with family members. In addition, children and young people receive exceptionally good quality life story work to help them to understand their culture, history and develop a sense of personal identity. Children have memory boxes and collect photographs, certificates and other important keepsakes to help them remember their time with their foster family. They also have exceptionally good quality life story books to help them understand their history and identity.

Children and young people are consulted about every aspect of their care. They receive numerous opportunities to express their wishes and feelings about their lives and contribute to the agency's plans for future work and development. High quality relationships between young people, their foster carers and staff help to ensure that children always have someone to whom they can speak when they have any worries or concerns. They have ready access to advocacy services and are well protected from all forms of bullying and discrimination.

Children participate in their reviews and are encouraged to speak alone with their foster carers' supervising social workers when they visit. This provides another potential source of support for young people and an additional professional who can listen to their views.

Almost all young people who displayed challenging behaviour when they arrived in placement, have been able to improve how they respond to difficult situations. Clear boundaries, excellent quality day-to-day care and exceptionally good access to skilled therapeutic support ensures that the large majority of children respond positively and find appropriate ways to express their feelings. For the very small number of young people who still take significant personal risks, incidents of going missing are gradually reducing. In the very few situations where there are ongoing concerns about risks to children, they are supported through effective, clear inter-agency working. This shows that for the vast majority of young people, the quality of care provided has a significant impact on their lives.

The majority of children and young people are very healthy. When children have chronic medical conditions, they receive excellent quality medical care. Children who require special diets for health or cultural reasons have their needs very well met. There are ample opportunities to engage in healthy physical activities such as swimming, canoeing, walking and climbing. Some young people go horse riding and others have firm plans to become sports professionals.

Children and young people's emotional health needs are exceptionally well met through their own carers, staff and the service's highly skilled therapist. Staff and foster carers receive specialist training in specific parenting skills using a well-established and effective neurophysiological attachment-based model. This has helped foster carers to create a warm, empathic environment in which children can begin their recovery from past trauma. Children and young people also have access to external child and adolescent mental health services.

Many children have significantly increased their school attendance since arriving in placement. There are numerous examples of children achieving exceptional results in school, sometimes well above their predicted levels. Children would not be able to do this without feeling safe and secure in stable foster placements. Some young people have achieved college and university places and others are in full time employment.

Children and young people enjoy excellent relationships with their foster carers and say that they feel fully included in family life. One young person said, 'I have lived with my foster carer for 11 years so I see it as my home and my mum that I have somewhere I will stay until I am older. I get to do things that I like, like swimming, drama and having my friends over to play.'

Young people engage in an exceptional range of exciting and challenging activities. Every school holiday provides an opportunity to meet other children and foster carers on an activity day. Children's comments included, 'they are very helpful and love us very much and take us lots of places and give up lots of their money to take us on holiday and stuff'; and 'I am happy with Amicus, as we do nice things together like go to see Harry Potter and Go Ape and have barbecues.'

The agency celebrates all achievements and 'endings' with a meal or shared activity. Young person can choose the ending to their placement; the Registered Manager

said that 'we work very hard at good endings'. They can invite birth family members, if this is appropriate. Young people can also choose their fun days. The agency keeps in touch with young people after they leave their placements and is currently supporting a high number of care leavers.

This impressive range of activities means that all the foster carers and children know each other and as one young person said, 'they are all my cousins'. When young people receive respite care, they go to stay with foster carers they already know well. This provides stability and consistency to help children feel safe and secure.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service is outstanding because the quality of care is exceptional and has a sustained positive impact on children and young people. Staff are dynamic and creative. They have exceptional skills and constantly seek to update and improve their knowledge for the children's benefit. The agency is actively engaged in promoting effective practice outside the setting, and subscribes to journals that highlight new developments in fostering.

Senior leaders have external supervision which helps them to reflect on practice, focus on agency development and source new research and legislation. This information is disseminated throughout the service. Each manager has a lead responsibility for improving knowledge in specific areas, such as safeguarding and life story work. Panel members are recruited to bring in a diverse range of additional skills to further enhance the agency's knowledge.

This small service seeks to focus on quality rather than quantity, and recruit sustainably. This helps to ensure that the agency can continue to support all the foster carers to an exceptionally high standard, throughout the length of the child's placement. In 2014, four new foster carers were recruited, including one respite placement. The agency aims to recruit foster carers who can meet the needs of exceptionally complex children and groups of brothers and sisters.

The service regularly monitors recruitment targets and needs through monthly management meetings. Leaders and managers have worked hard to establish strong relationships with placing authorities. There are currently eight local authorities for whom this agency is a Tier 1 (priority) provider, which means that they are among the agencies that are approached first for a placement. When the service does not have a foster carer that can provide a placement for a specific child, they have sometimes recruited to meet particularly complex needs. There is a high level of trust with commissioning bodies, and the service meets with them quarterly in order to ensure that recruitment is targeted where it is most needed.

Prospective foster carers receive very good quality information to help prepare them for their role. All those interviewed praised the service's preparation and assessment processes. Foster carers say that there is exceptionally positive contact and support

with the assessing social workers, clarity about the process itself and reliability in terms of meeting targets. Foster carers commented that the Skills to Foster training is robust and prepares prospective carers well for their future role.

During their preparation, prospective foster carers are introduced to the agency's chosen theoretical model, PACE. PACE is a parenting style informed by neurophysiological brain development and how this is affected by early life experiences. Training in PACE continues throughout the foster carers' careers with the agency. It also forms the basis of direct work with children, foster carers' and staff supervision and the agency's internal and external communication style. All social workers have received level 1 and some have received level 2 training in this model of work. Having a strong theoretical base provides a coherent structure for the agency's work. It has a highly effective impact on children's lives, because it addresses the trauma they have experienced.

The agency organises numerous imaginative, enjoyable shared activities which bring together foster carers, their own children, fostered children and staff. During the inspection, foster carers and children gathered to enjoy a climbing wall experience at a local climbing centre. This was followed by pizza and cake to round off the afternoon and celebrate two foster carers' birthdays. During this event, the inspector spoke with a large group of foster carers and a number of individual children. All were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences with Amicus. Many foster carers and children spoke of the agency feeling like a 'family'. Some young people regard the other foster carers as their 'uncles and aunties', and fostered children as their 'cousins'. These events and the informal contacts they promote help to ensure that foster carers have support from all quarters when they meet challenges in their task.

Respite care is introduced very carefully and because of the children's very complex needs, it is regarded as an essential part of the support offered to foster carers. Without respite, it would be very difficult to sustain placement stability and this would not be in the children's best interests. Foster carers receive up to 21 respite nights per year, 14 of which are funded by the placing authority and another seven nights are available if needed from Amicus. Children are introduced to respite carers very gradually and this is always managed at the child's pace. This helps children to feel that they are going to stay with someone who is very familiar to them and with whom they already have some level of attachment.

Foster carers were unanimous in their praise of the training and supervision provided. This high level of support is intrinsic to the agency's ethos and a number of foster carers had moved from other agencies because of the service offered by Amicus. Foster carers' initial preparation incorporates sessions on how to achieve the training, support and development standards and all attain this within 12 months of approval. Foster carers' training involves existing foster carers and young people, who help them to understand the realities of the task.

The ongoing training programme to promote continuing skills is excellent. Some of the courses are open to young people; for example, they received their own E-safety

training at their own level, while the foster carers received an adult version.

Foster carers are exceptionally well supported by this service. This enables them to sustain their placements and work with very challenging situations. The agency promotes the team around the child. The inspector observed an example of this during a multi-agency safeguarding meeting.

The service also works well with schools to promote staff understanding of attachment and trauma. This helps teaching staff to understand why some children behave the way they do, and to support rather than sanction them. The service's therapist also visits schools to advise them on specific issues. Exceptional outcomes are achieved because children are genuinely at the centre of everything the service does.

Foster carers say that the exceptional support provided was a major factor in attracting them to this agency. Day-to-day supervision for foster carers is excellent, including out of hours support. Foster carers confirmed that there is always someone available to talk to. Foster carers also benefit from support groups, a great deal of informal contact and regular phone calls to ensure that all is well. This accessibility also ensures that foster carers and children's views are conveyed and listened to. For example, foster carers were fully involved in the decision to move to the present office premises.

Senior managers and staff work very hard to ensure that foster carers feel valued at all times. A staff member said, 'the ethos of Amicus is one of inclusiveness, valuing difference and embracing diversity. Talking, listening, consulting with children and young people, carers and local authorities to provide tailor-made bespoke services that work for each fostering household. We are all different and want or need different support services at different times.'

To further support foster carers and children, the service has purchased a converted barn on the Pembrokeshire coast. This is the location for the annual summer camp. This house can accommodate large groups and is available for all carers and staff to book free of charge. The barn is fully adapted for disabled children and the service hires specialist equipment for them to help them and their carers to obtain full enjoyment of their holiday. Carers and children spoke of fond memories of canoeing, swimming and singing around a camp fire.

Excellent feedback from foster carers who have visited the barn shows that it is a valuable resource and has had a major beneficial impact on fostering families and children. One foster carer said, '(it is) well thought out, there are homely items all around the house....it had many toys that you perhaps do not see so often; fuzzy felts, all sorts of games....definitely brought back memories of our childhood....in every room it was like an Aladdin's cave with lovely little toys around every corner.'

The foster carers interviewed have strong views that they do not want the agency to become too large. The senior managers are very clear that if this were to happen, the caring, personal contact between agency and fostering families could be lost.

Young people, carers, staff and the managers all have a feeling of ownership, and this is very important to them.

Children have many opportunities to share their views. This may be through a pizza-making activity in the Community Centre kitchen, or through a shared event where staff meet all the children and chat to them informally. Supervising social workers always see children on their own when they visit. Young people sometimes phone staff and text them to ask a question or pass on some information. The agency has a staff member who is trained in tutoring in alternative communication systems, which helps foster carers to communicate with disabled children. This ensures that all children are included in consultations. Staff commented, 'we work closely with our young people to ensure their voices are heard, we arrange a variety of events and activities to gather views and are strive to develop new avenues of capturing their feedback.'

Another staff member said, 'children and young people being involved in decisions about their care and support is central in the way we work. We have found that children and young people more open to talk to you when they are in a relaxed atmosphere, so there is a lot of emphasis on activities and events. It's an opportunity to listen, to learn, and help children and young people make decisions.'

The agency has a strong and effective fostering panel. Panel members are recruited safely, from a diverse range of backgrounds, and have relevant expertise. They receive good quality training and annual appraisals.

Foster carers said that they found the panel process to be fair and that they were made to feel as relaxed as this formal process allows. The panel performs an essential quality assurance function for the agency and feeds back relevant comments about assessments and reports. The panel chair confirmed that they have found the quality of reports to be good, with effective evaluation and sufficient information to enable the panel to make a recommendation. This was also found during the inspection.

There has been a recent change of panel chair. The current chair is a highly skilled independent professional with considerable experience in fostering and adoption. She has already helped the service to introduce some positive changes to practice; for example, there are now two agency decision makers, in case one is not available when a decision is needed.

Taking panel minutes so that they provide a professional and accurate record of the meeting is a crucial role that requires exceptional skill and specialised training. The panel administrator was insufficiently supported in the role because the minutes were not quality-assured. Until recently, she had received no specific training. This is now being addressed, but work is not yet complete. The new chair has been instrumental in leading recent improvements to the minutes, and the service has responded to this well by providing panel administration training and support for the administrator to meet with others in that role to share good practice. The most recent set of minutes (January 2015) convey a much more accurate record of the

meeting, but still show a lack of clarity in places. For example, there are typing errors and there is no list of reasons for the recommendations. There is room for further improvement, and so a recommendation has been made.

The service receives requests for placements from a number of local authorities for which it is a preferred provider. All referrals are recorded onto the electronic system so that managers can see what types of placement are needed and identify patterns and trends. There are currently no foster carers without children placed, which shows that the agency is providing the type of foster carer that placing authorities need.

The agency is highly effective at obtaining good quality information about children prior to placement.

After a robust matching process, the service works closely with the placing authority's social worker and IRO to ensure that Looked-After Children paperwork is in place promptly, so that it can inform the care provided. Reviews are held at timely intervals and that the care plan and placement plan are reviewed when required. Supervising social workers attend all LAC reviews and the agency ensures that IROs are kept informed of any actions that the social worker has not completed.

All children and young people have very high quality risk assessments to guide and inform placement decisions. The agency insists on clear arrangements for delegated authority, which ensures that young people can lead normal lives and have friends to stay. This empowers foster carers to care for children safely within clear boundaries. Consequently, children are able to lead natural lives as far as possible, with appropriate safeguards in place.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This service is outstanding because safeguarding practice is exceptionally effective and is a high priority for all children and young people. The vast majority of children are safe and secure in their placements, supported by exceptionally knowledgeable, well trained staff and foster carers. Practice is informed by research in child protection and a deep understanding of the issues surrounding child sexual exploitation.

As a result, the most vulnerable young people who are seriously at risk from exploitation are managed within their placements through highly effective multi-agency working. The agency is realistic about these young people's needs and constantly re-evaluates its own practice, as well as the level of risk.

There have been a few occasions when the service came to a considered view that young people's needs were better met in residential care. In those situations, the agency worked extremely effectively with the new placement to ensure a smooth transition.

The service has exceptionally positive and effective relationships with placing authorities, the police, schools and other agencies. This ensures that safeguarding issues are effectively shared and discussed so that a clear, multi-agency management plan can be implemented.

Children and young people receive exceptionally good education on the risks and opportunities in life. Exciting and stimulating activities help them to understand practical safety and challenge themselves to take managed risks. The agency provides training in e-safety for young people as well as for foster carers and staff, which helps them to use the internet safely. Staff and foster carers have received specialist training in guarding against and identifying child sexual exploitation. This helps to ensure that foster carers and staff are alert to the risks and aware of the warning signs, so that the agency can respond promptly and appropriately.

Young people understand how to raise concerns, but because of the excellent level of communication throughout the service, they rarely feel the need to do so. There have been no complaints since the last inspection. Young people told the inspector that they have exceptionally good relationships with their foster carers and therefore feel supported at all times.

Risk assessments are constantly under review. For young people who are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, there are regular multi-agency reviews at least monthly to ensure that information is shared and risk is managed in the most effective way possible. Young people generally do not go missing, but for the few who do so, incidents are carefully monitored and the potential risk to the young person is continually reviewed in line with locally-agreed protocols.

Many children looked after by the agency have experienced considerable trauma, neglect or abuse in their early lives. The agency uses a therapeutic model of parenting and social work practice that specifically addresses these experiences and supports children, foster carers and staff through positive parenting and communication techniques. This is highly effective in promoting safe and secure placements and exceptionally aware, sensitive professional practice by foster carers and social workers. This means that children are very effectively supported if they make a disclosure and receive all the help they need to start to recover from past experiences.

The agency ensures that safeguarding and child protection are at the centre of practice in foster carers' recruitment, assessment, preparation, supervision and training. Safe care is central to practice and all foster carers understand the meaning of this for their household. Annual unannounced visits help to ensure that children and young people are kept safe, and annual reviews address health and safety issues as part of the recommendation to continue approval.

The service ensures that staff and panel member recruitment and vetting is robust and informed by equal opportunities legislation. All staff receive a full complement of checks to help to ensure that they are suitable, because they all have face-to-face contact with children.

The agency's response to children at risk of abuse and exploitation shows exceptionally high quality safeguarding practice. The agency is managing a significant degree of risk through strong, effective interagency relationships and excellent communication. The young people's safety is under constant review in the light of government reports about sexual exploitation and children who go missing, and research papers. Senior staff have considerable experience in safeguarding and managing child protection services and are well aware of the possibility of the situation changing rapidly and requiring a change in strategy.

On the rare occasions when there have been allegations against foster carers, the agency uses an open and transparent style of communication to provide the necessary support while investigations are taking place. Any concerns are reported to the local area safeguarding officer immediately. The focus of the investigation is always based on the child's needs.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The service is outstanding because leaders and managers are exceptionally knowledgeable, creative and confident in every aspect of the agency's operation. They are passionate about providing the highest quality nurturing care, underpinned by an excellent understanding of the impact of trauma on children's development. Leaders and managers provided numerous examples of how children's lives have been transformed while being looked after by Amicus foster carers. They work hard to establish highly effective relationships with placing authorities, the police, schools and other agencies to promote outstanding outcomes for children in every area of their lives. This is achieved through attention to detail, excellent communication and sharing in actions necessary to improve children's lives.

Leaders and managers create an ethos which values the family as the centre of their operations. Foster carers are exceptionally well supported and many of those interviewed commented on the family atmosphere when they meet on the numerous imaginative and exciting activity days. Permanency for children is valued and celebrated. The majority of children and young people feel safe and secure in their fostering families and regard them as their own.

Outstanding outcomes for children are the highest priority. Leaders and managers track children's progress and constantly review all the agency's functions, in addition to the regular monthly and annual reviews of the service's progress. The agency takes swift action to protect any children who are engaging in risk-taking behaviour. Although there have not been any safeguarding issues or complaints against foster carers, if this were to happen, the agency has clear strategies to respond to this while keeping children at the centre of the process. Leaders and managers ensure that annual quality and performance data forms are completed and submitted to Ofsted.

The agency has a clear and detailed Statement of Purpose, which is available on the web site for the public, and is supplied to prospective foster carers, parents and placing authorities. The service consults children, foster carers and placing authorities about planned developments and the quality of care. Consultations are listened to and acted upon, helping to drive improvement.

Because the service has an excellent reputation, many foster carers are recruited through word-of-mouth. Foster carers are intensely loyal to the service and value the way in which they are supported through training, development and regular, high quality supervision. Managers monitor recruitment patterns and have ensured that there has been steady but sustainable growth in the service. They do not want the service to become too large because they are determined to retain the family atmosphere that makes such a significant contribution to its success.

Leaders and managers have a reflective, evidence-based approach to learning from experiences within placements. This has ensured that service development is informed by considerable expertise as well as total commitment to meeting children and young people's needs and promoting excellent outcomes for them. When placements have ended prematurely, the service has managed this process well and has incorporated any learning into practice.

The agency has sufficient well-qualified, registered social work staff to provide excellent recruitment, assessment and support for foster carers within the sustainable targets that they set for themselves. Caseloads are manageable and staff receive very good quality regular supervision and training to improve practice and promote professional development. For example, staff have attended training in an introduction to Islamic faith and beliefs; attachment and trauma; the complexity of contact and disabled children and child protection. Training for panel members has included an introduction to the parenting model used by this service, and drug and alcohol awareness.

Supervision arrangements within the management team are unusual, but are highly effective. Although there are only three senior leaders, they have taken action to ensure that there is sufficient external scrutiny and challenge to help drive improvement. For example, the Registered Manager and the Responsible Individual receive external supervision from an independent professional to help bring in fresh ideas and ensure that there are no conflicts of interest.

All staff and panel members receive annual appraisals, which incorporate children's and foster carers' views. One member of staff commented, 'the appraisal process used in Amicus is inclusive, not only the opportunity for me to review, reflect, but for children and young people, carers and other staff members to contribute on my performance. This helps improve my practice.' Another staff member commented, 'I have felt extremely supported by my manager and our therapist in managing the day-to-day stresses of supporting carers and the young people they care for.'

The service has an effective and highly motivated administration team which

supports all their functions well. The administrators all know the children and families and are actively involved in the agency's programme of activities. The service is sufficiently well resourced for its size, and is financially viable. Any surplus is used to motivate staff and foster carers and further improve the quality of care.

Notifications to Ofsted are made when necessary in a timely manner. These are very well recorded and the service has always been able to demonstrate the rationale for its actions in terms of safeguarding decisions. There were no requirements or recommendations from the last inspection.

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.