

ABC Fostering Services

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number SC360525
Inspection date 18/01/2016
Inspector Rachel Britten
Type of inspection Full
Provision subtype

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Date of last inspection 28/02/2013

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Service information

Brief description of the service

ABC is a private limited company operating as an independent fostering agency. The service was first registered in accordance with the Care Standards Act 2000 on 23 March 2007. It offers a number of different types of placements for children and young people: emergency, short-term, long-term, parent and child, and permanent placements. At the time of the inspection the service has 118 carers who care for 75 children and young people. The volume of recruitment during 2014/2015 produced a 24% rise in the number of foster carers and a 22% rise in the number of approved places.

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, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met exceedingly well. Their welfare is safeguarded and promoted to exemplary standards. The service does particularly well at enabling brothers and sisters to live together: 42% of all those children in the service live with their brothers or sisters. This is against a 10% national average. In addition, more young people than the national average are 'staying put' with their foster families. The service provides the most effective support to children and young people. As a result, children and young people live and thrive in safe, stable homes where they develop extremely secure relationships. For all children and young people, the quality of direct work by supervising social workers and the manager is of the highest quality

and is supporting measurably improved progress. Many children and young people's progress is exceptional, based on their starting points.

Recruitment, preparation, training and support to foster carers is of high quality. It results in a diverse and immensely skilled range of carers. A supervising social worker assesses new carers, helps match children to them and also provides their ongoing support. Consistency and commitment from individual workers is a key strength underpinning both children's progress and carers' confidence and skills.

Children and young people benefit from foster carers who understand the service's 'Secure Base' model and use it in their everyday parenting. Carers are available to children and really help them understand why they're in care. The team around the child respects, listens and acts upon carers' knowledge and experience of each child. Together they push for clear care plans and a strong focus on birth family contact arrangements that every party is satisfied with. Carers feel very valued for their immense input and children get the best help from all the professionals involved in their care.

The service enjoys an excellent and enduring reputation amongst numerous local authorities in the Midlands. Placing authorities see children and young people achieve stability and make real progress with their foster carers, often after experiencing multiple placement breakdowns. Key elements of success include, the service's ability to make prompt, well-thought out, reliable matches; their provision of prompt psychological, behavioural and medical advice; the expertise and commitment of the whole staff team to support each fostering household with current issues; and advocacy for children to stay long term when their placements work.

The registered manager and responsible individual are totally committed to achieving security and progress for all children and young people, regardless of the complexity of their needs and behaviours. The manager introduced the 'Secure Base' model to the agency and ensures that it underpins everything the service does. He works with the researcher who proposed and continues to develop the model. The manager devises understandable, practical and highly effective ways to use the model in fostering. For example, he has developed a training workbook for prospective carers to use and a recording tool that measures children's progress and identifies areas of entrenched difficulty. These tools add significant quality to the service's work and therefore the outcomes for children and young people.

Leaders' and managers' visibility and availability are remarkable. They all work from one office. They visit carers and children and young people personally as well as attending meetings with them. They include young people, for example, in interviewing prospective carers and they find out children's views about what is important to them. The registered manager's empathy, skill, energy and insight inspires and helps children, young people, carers and staff to achieve great things.

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

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Children and young people benefit enormously from stable and settled family lives with their foster carers. They all have genuine and deep attachments to their carers and feel immensely secure. Thirty-two of them are living with their brothers and sisters. Most children and young people are in secure, long term placements, many of which started out on a short term basis. In the large majority of cases, children and young people are making excellent progress and have expressed a clear wish to stay. One social worker said, 'court asked me to find the perfect foster carers for the children and I feel I have found them.' Another one said, '(young person) has built fantastic relationships and her understanding of appropriate relationships and safe adults has significantly improved. Her behaviour has also improved tremendously. She reports she feels very safe with her carers and wishes to stay there for ever.'

Children and young people have close, trusting and enduring attachments to their carers. They truly feel part of the family. All carers make themselves physically and emotionally available to children and young people. They play with them, listen to them and spend as much time as possible with them. A young person said, 'they include me in conversations and decisions and they don't leave me when I'm upset. They always check if I am okay. If I was worried I would speak to my carer because I trust her.' An independent reviewing officer said, 'my young person is made to feel part of the family. She accompanies the carers on holiday and attends family events with them. I get a sense from visiting the home that this is home for her.'

Most young people's secure base with their foster family means that they choose to stay on with their carers past the age of 18. The agency fully supports this. Young people know that they have made excellent progress in learning to trust others; managing their feelings; and developing self-worth and personal effectiveness. They know that this has happened because of the way their carers have helped them. They attend college and university and have career aspirations that far exceed what they thought they could achieve before they were placed. One young person said, 'My carer checks my homework diary and she helps me with this. She is always there when I use the laptop to make sure I'm doing what I should be. She came to the open evening at college and she also goes to parents evening.' A social worker said that another carer 'consistently motivates the young person to excel and achieve her academic goals.'

Children and young people receive helpful information about the fostering agency and their carers, before they move in. The agency and foster family electronically share pre-prepared, welcoming photo guides via local authority social workers. Children and young people have introductory visits too and choose the pace with which they move in. They receive a useful guide with good information about who is

who in the agency and how to complain and get their views heard. They also access a child-friendly area on the agency's website where games, as well as useful information, are available. Their views influence the agency's priorities. For example, children and young people said that going on holiday with their carers and experiencing change of social worker are highly significant events for them. The agency therefore monitors the impact of these things and ensures that carers keep them in mind and address them.

Children and young people trust and confide in their agency social worker because they know them well. They enjoy regular quality time with them. They all know the agency manager too. They really feel part of the agency as well as part of their carer family. They treasure the consistent care, interest and attention offered by these people in their lives. Many young people are making a significant contribution to the recruitment of prospective carers through interviewing them and talking to them about fostering from a young person's perspective. They are enjoying the opportunity to try something for their 'CV' and say this has helped their confidence too.

Children and young people enjoy an excellent range of opportunities, support and help. The agency enables all carers to provide children with holidays and opportunities to learn to swim and ride a bicycle. They promote a range of hobbies and participation in clubs and activities like horse-riding and youth club. Carers broaden children and young people's horizons significantly, with interesting days out to places of interest or entertainment. Carers include them in social occasions and celebrations with their own wider families. One young person said, 'it's amazing; I love the horse; if I've got any problems I can talk to my carers and they will help me. I actually feel like a real family here – they are the best foster parents.'

Children and young people have every opportunity to lead a healthy life. They receive consistently good advice on healthy living and receive highly effective emotional, physical, psychological and therapeutic help. For example, young people receive prompt psychological assessment and regular input. They receive sensitive advice about personal hygiene and support about sexual health and relationships. The agency also give young people whose parenting is being assessed, clear, effective parenting advice that is individually tailored to their learning needs. This means that young people are maturing successfully to adulthood and are developing a positive identity that they did not previously believe possible.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

Carers' and staff's professional practice far exceeds the characteristics of a good judgement. They apply the 'secure base model' with understanding and commitment. They innovate with the model to measure children and young people's progress and identify ways to support that progress. They say fostering is 'not just common sense,

but responsive parenting'. Carers and staff continuously seek ways to give children and young people the five secure base elements: availability; sensitivity; acceptance; co-operation; and family membership. They assess the extent to which children and young people feel settled in their placement and measure this. They look for evidence that children and young people are developing self-esteem; a sense of belonging and an understanding of their past. They seek evidence that children and young people are developing an ability to trust and to manage their feelings. Carers and staff thereby make an exceptional difference to children and young people's lives. A children's Guardian said about one placement, 'these carers are exceptional: the children are thriving and are provided with an exemplary standard of overall nurturing care and attention.'

The agency conducts recruitment and assessment to an outstanding standard. As a result, high calibre carers, equipped with insight, commitment and skill, provide the best foster care. Specifically developed group preparation training, delivered by the manager, emphasises the significance of the foster carer role. Leaders, managers and staff are personally involved in recruiting carers. They visit potential carers at their homes and assign them with a member of staff who conducts their assessment and continues as their supervising social worker. Social workers conduct far-reaching interviews and skilfully explore prospective carers' motivations, insights and abilities. They train them in the secure base model using a workbook leading to certification. They make an unannounced visit and they find out the views and feelings of children and young people in the family. They triangulate their assessments throughout alongside the manager and, where appropriate, the medical advisor. Young people interview prospective carers and give the agency their view about applicants' suitability and strengths. If they have good evidence that a carer is less committed, this is addressed and in at least one instance has led to an assessment ending. The agency panel then provides excellent scrutiny and challenge to prospective carers and their assessing social workers. This ensures that any weak or poorly explored areas are addressed early after approval and the quality of assessment work is continuously improved. Significant, continuing growth in carer numbers and few carer departures demonstrates the agency's excellent reputation. Children and young people put down roots and flourish with outstanding carers thanks to excellent quality recruitment and assessment.

The agency provides very high quality ongoing support to carers. Children and young people benefit hugely from this. Supervising social workers make themselves available directly and regularly to children and carers. A robust '24/7' duty system ensures that all staff know children and families. The staff team meet weekly and are up to date about current issues happening for children, young people and carers. They play a pivotal role in supporting carers to positively help children and young people have contact with their birth families and significant others. Staff and managers support foster carer at all meetings about the child, including looked after children reviews, education planning meetings and professionals meetings. They provide good quality written reports, based upon carer and social worker recordings. They significantly influence care and permanency planning in this way. The agency's

excellent support means that children and young people feel secure. They know that they are listened to. The agency addresses and minimises any burden of feeling responsible for, or split between, two different families.

The staff team draw upon the expertise within the team and also the high quality contributions of their medical expert panel member and of a locally based psychology service. These experts provide prompt and helpful direct help to children, young people and carers. They provide training to the panel and to the staff. They also contribute to formal assessments of children and young people's ongoing needs. For example, experts' reports and evaluations are a key part of the agency's contribution in court proceedings about children's care arrangements. The medical advisor and supervising social worker gave well thought out, individually tailored input to a parent and child assessment placement. They then made well evidenced and insightful recommendations to the court about a young person's capacity to safely parent their child. Overall, high calibre staff ensure that children and young people receive the skilled help they need with their complex difficulties, at the right time. Placements therefore stand the test of time and breakdowns remain lower than the national average.

The agency's matching of children to carers works. It is extremely thorough and insightful and children's social workers, independent reviewing officers and commissioners confirm this. Referrals are carefully considered by the agency referrals officer, manager and supervising social workers. The referrals officer has met every carer at their home and believes this is crucial to effective and personalised matching. A local authority placements officer said, 'I think it's the honesty with referral system about the needs of the child, not just the practicalities, and ensuring the match is right to start with. This reduces breakdown.'

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

A number of young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation, self-harm and substance misuse have made outstanding progress. They have developed a good understanding of how to protect themselves because their carers are frank and nurturing to them. A young person said, 'it is amazing – I actually feel like part of a real family'. Placement plans and risk assessments identify the impact of abuse and neglect and how actions under each of the secure base model strands protect and support children and young people. Carers are skilled at explaining to children and young people what is happening and they help them understand the plan to protect them. Carers work well with police, schools and health services to protect them fully. Any incidents where young people have been exposed to further risk of harm are very effectively minimised because the agency review, support and help everyone respond and learn lessons from incidents. Six supervising social work staff have undertaken 'train the trainer' courses about child sexual exploitation (CSE) and have delivered this training immediately to those carers for whom it is relevant. They

advise carers insightfully about how to respond to any missing incidents. They enlist the knowledge of local police to inform carers where local CSE 'hotspots' are.

Carers have a comprehensive and impressive understanding of how a secure base culture underpins children and young people's safety. Carers go right back to basics with young people: they help them understand why they are in care and help them make coherent sense of the past. The agency teach carers that by helping young people understand these things, they will be able to accept the nurture carers give them. Then young people can settle into a safe lifestyle where they can build a future. This works.

Young people are working hard at their education, are making age-appropriate and safe peer relationships and are able to deal with their feelings through talking, hobbies and therapy. They have helpline numbers and direct contact numbers for the agency, including the manager. One young person who is now safe and free from abuse and exploitation said, 'the caring and the love is best – it's a lovely family.'

Carers and staff demonstrate comprehensive, impressive understanding of safeguarding and the impact of abuse on children. They are very well briefed and trained relevantly to the needs of the children and young people they care for. For example, one carer received training about substance misuse, adolescent mental health and first aid training. Carers are therefore able to support children and young people skilfully, even in the most difficult and demanding of circumstances. As a result, many children and young people are receiving stability for the first time in their lives, often after multiple placement moves. A local authority worker said, 'It is real – there is evidence in a number of cases. There are issues with challenging behaviour but they don't give up. Carers will do everything they can; they will work on alternative strategies.' From a secure base, carers enable children and young people to go out with friends, have phones and access the internet. They are taught to swim, ride a bike, cross roads and participate in social occasions safely and appropriately.

Children and young people are learning to manage unhealthy, destructive, aggressive and/or self-harming behaviours thanks to carers' skill, commitment, nurture and positive approaches. Carers recognise the impact of past abuse and neglect on behaviour and the action they take is rooted in secure base theory. They make themselves available to children and young people to help them understand their plan and what contact they have with their birth family. The agency devise behaviour management plans that are practical and effective. They review these when behaviours are at a critical 'red' stage and take time to help carers 'regroup' afterwards when things have calmed to the 'blue' stage. Children and young people with severe and ingrained behaviour difficulties receive tireless, patient and positive parenting. Carers play with children and give them their undivided attention. They guide them gently and lovingly, with good routines, praise them wherever possible and provide them with as many enjoyable and challenging opportunities and experiences as possible. As a result, they are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was predicted in all areas of their development.

This is a safe fostering service with safe families. The recruitment and vetting of carers, staff and panel members is rigorous and insightful. Working practices are open and subject to excellent levels of managerial presence and scrutiny day to day. Staff visit carers unannounced and spend time with children and young people without their carers present. Staff notice inappropriate behaviour and take action to prevent anyone from harming children and young people. The agency ensures that disclosures, allegations and safeguarding incidents are referred promptly and transparently to local authorities and/or local authority designated officers (LADOs) as appropriate. The agency manager is frequently asked subsequently to investigate concerns on behalf of the local authority or LADO. Work done in this way is professional, insightful and transparent, with clear lessons learnt and shared. Reflective analysis and learning points for assessment, preparation and matching are considered by the review panel and, where appropriate, referral to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS). Local authorities are impressed with the safeguarding practice of the agency. A LADO recently said to the manager: 'thorough report, within timescales, which is appreciated; reassuring to know you take allegations seriously.' Children and young people are therefore well safeguarded and unnecessary placement moves are avoided.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Outstanding**

The registered manager has been in post for about three years. He is inspirational and influential in the agency, the region and in fostering. His warmth, insight and availability to children and young people, carers, staff and professionals are exceptional. He is highly qualified and experienced in fostering, child protection and management. He is convinced that a Secure Base culture provides a useable framework upon which to create and sustain an outstanding fostering service. He demonstrates that the direct work provided by the agency is of the highest quality. It is supporting measurably improved progress and outcomes, which for some children and young people are exceptional. He says, 'Secure Base influences our day to day decision making – it is not surface window dressing where we just learn a few catchphrases.'

Despite consistent growth, leaders and managers have maintained an immensely strong personal and family feel to the agency. Their statement of purpose says, 'We're big enough to be respected; but small enough to know each of our foster carers individually.' They work entirely from one open plan office and staff are expected to be there when they are not working in carers' homes. Weekly meetings of the whole staff and manager group ensure that communication is regular, comprehensive and effective. Carers and young people feel a strong sense of belonging to the agency because they know the supervising social workers, the referrals officer, the manager and the responsible individual. Leaders and staff work extremely hard to preserve their personal knowledge of, and support to, every carer,

child and young person. Not only does this ensure that everyone receives the fullest support, but it demonstrates the same Secure Base values of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation and family membership that the agency is built upon.

The manager and registered individual continuously seek to improve the agency and the outcomes for children and young people. For example, they are focusing on improving behaviour management planning and are using an accredited behaviour management training organisation to train the supervising social workers as trainers in behaviour management and appropriate last resort physical intervention. They are also creating an independence planning course for young people that is linked to the threads of Secure Base. They have shared their briefing for carer assessments, including prompts for a Secure Base final analysis, across the sector. The fostering service in Guernsey has adopted all their Secure Base templates, including the tools for measuring children's progress and placement planning.

The agency continue to attract high calibre specialist professionals to support their work, namely their medical advisor and the psychology service they commission from. Their medical advisor offers up to date training and advice to social workers and carers on child development and issues in child health. She said, 'I would not be here if I did not rate the agency – I have a reputation to uphold.'

The manager and registered individual monitor the quality of the service rigorously. They check if there are any children who haven't been supported to understand why they are in care. They prioritise checking that the three contextual strands Sinclair identified for successful fostering are there: a strong relationship between the carer and child; a level of contact every party is satisfied with; and a clear plan for the future. Management quarterly reviews are informed by the views of children, young people, parents, foster carers and stakeholders. The results of reviews drive continuous improvement in outcomes for children and young people and service provision. The panel makes a significant contribution to the quality assurance of carer assessment and review. Managers carefully analyse all placement breakdowns and take necessary action to avoid these. They review all incidents and look for lessons to improve the support and training of carers. Their notifications to Ofsted are completed with professional insight and good grasp of the fostering regulations. They provide clear evidence of high quality and wide-ranging strategies being used to minimise future incidents.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to inform 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 and 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.