

# Able Fostering Agency

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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<b>Inspection date</b>	23 June 2016
<b>Inspector</b>	Mrs Sharon Lloyd
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full

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<b>Setting address</b>	The Bridgewater Complex, 36 Canal Street, Bootle, Merseyside L20 8AH
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<b>Registered manager</b>	Mr Ian Hastings
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Mrs Claire Oates
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	18 September 2014

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Able Fostering is an independent fostering agency, which is a limited company. It operates from an office in the Bridgewater Complex, on the outskirts of Bootle. The agency recruits, assesses and supports foster carers to provide a range of placements for children and young people who are placed by neighbouring local authorities. The agency has been operating since 2010. At the time of this inspection, there were three fostering households offering long-term and respite placements to six children and young people. One of these households was on hold.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

**Good:** An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

**Requires improvement:** An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

**Inadequate:** An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

## Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children live in secure, stable placements where their development and progress are promoted. They are happy and relaxed and make good overall progress, which equips them well for future independence.

Children form strong bonds with their foster carers and report that they are well cared for and safe. The incidents of children going missing or being engaged in harmful behaviour are low. There have been no serious incidents reported since the last inspection. Any concerning behaviour is quickly addressed and reduced. Children's health and education needs are well supported and the agency works with schools and the local authority to promote children's positive engagement with education.

Supportive carers provide enjoyable short breaks for children with disabilities, including holidays and trips on public transport to places such as the countryside and seaside. Children receive good support to take risks that promote their social and emotional development.

Foster carers feel very well supported by the agency. They describe the service as 'responsive' and say that the training is 'very good'. Foster carers receive effective support to take an active part in care planning so that they work in partnership with other agencies connected with the children that they care for. They are central to decision making.

Commissioners and placing social workers speak positively about the quality of the service. They recognise that the agency, and foster carers in particular, demonstrates commitment and staying power so that children who may otherwise have had multiple placement moves benefit from long-term stability.

The agency has made mostly good progress in meeting the requirements and recommendations made at the last inspection. However, it was unable to demonstrate how it has met some of the shortfalls, including those relating to the assessment of carers. This is because no assessments have been undertaken since the last inspection and the agency cannot demonstrate it has provided assessing social workers with further training to increase their assessment skills.

The leadership and management of the service require improvement. The drive for service development has not been strong. Management monitoring and action planning for improvement are not robust. The registered manager directly supervises the social workers and is also the agency decision maker. This undermines the quality of decision making and quality assurance. Panel's scrutiny of review reports requires improvement.

Two foster families have left the agency since the last inspection and no families have been recruited. The provider does not maintain good oversight and records of

the effectiveness of recruitment strategies. Consequently, the agency could not provide evidence of determined recruitment.

## Areas for improvement

### Statutory Requirements

This section sets out the actions which must be taken so that the registered person(s) meets the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the National Minimum Standards. The registered person(s) must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
Keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose so that it accurately reflects the service provision; and notify Ofsted of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4 (a)(b))	15 August 2016
Ensure that the agency's fostering panel undertakes its statutory functions in accordance with this regulation in a robust manner. (Regulation 25)	16 September 2016

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further, the service should take account of the following recommendations:

- Strengthen the leadership and management of the service to ensure delivery of a good-quality service which meets the aims and objectives of the agency as laid out in the statement of purpose and development plan. In particular, ensure that effective recruitment strategies promote the approval of new carers and increase the pace at which identified shortfalls in the service are addressed. (NMS 16.2)
- Ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision maker need in order to make an objective approval decision and that these contain sufficient evidence, detail and social work analysis. (NMS 13.7)
- Ensure that reviews of foster carers' approval are sufficiently thorough as to allow the fostering service to properly satisfy itself about the carers' ongoing ability to foster. In particular, ensure that review reports demonstrate that suitability checks have been undertaken on all adults living in the foster home

and contain details of the foster carers' training and development during the review period. (NMS 13.8)

- Ensure that the agency decision maker in reaching a decision lists the material taken into account, identifies key arguments, is satisfied that the panel has fully addressed the arguments and identifies their own reasons for their decision. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 5.40)
- Ensure that the wishes, feelings and views of children are taken into account in developing the fostering service. Where children are reluctant to contribute to service development, demonstrate in your records how the agency has attempted to gather this information. (NMS 1.7)
- Ensure that systems in place to monitor and improve the quality of care are effective. In particular, ensure that review reports relating to the matters set out in Schedule 6 of The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 are sufficiently detailed and evaluative as to provide analysis of how well the service is supporting children's progress and how the agency is addressing its improvement and development agenda. Ensure that foster carers' views and complaints raised inform the development of the service. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 4.8)
- Ensure that suitable arrangements exist for professional supervision of the registered manager. (NMS 24.3)
- Ensure that the system in place to monitor the quality and adequacy of record keeping is effective. In particular, ensure that written risk assessments relating to individual children are kept up to date and provide good guidance to foster carers in how to protect children from harm associated with risk-taking behaviour. (NMS 26.2)
- Ensure that children understand how to protect themselves. In particular, ensure that foster carers understand how children and young people use social media and provide good support and guidance that promotes their online safety. (Volume 4, statutory guidance, paragraph 3.65)

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

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children and young people benefit from stable placements in families where they feel that they belong. Those who have had multiple placement moves before moving to live with their current carers are settled and happy and say that they are well cared for. A young person explained, 'I like it here. They're a nice family. I lived in two other families before moving here and I hated it. This one's good. I've lived here a long time.'

There have been no unplanned endings to placements since the inception of this agency and some children and young people have lived with their foster carers for four to five years. Although numbers are small, this compares favourably to other independent fostering agencies where the average percentage of unplanned endings in 2015 was 12%. Social workers appreciate the commitment that foster carers show. One social worker explained, 'I think had he gone elsewhere, the placement would have broken down.'

Two families have left the service since the last inspection and in one case, where there was a child in placement, the child transferred with the foster family to another agency. Two young people are approaching adulthood and preparing to leave care. Although the young people would like to stay and live with the foster carers beyond 18 years, this option is not currently available within this agency. Instead, young people receive good support to help prepare for future independence. This includes learning self-care and domestic skills, learning to use public transport and taking responsibility for making their own appointments. Since the last inspection, one young person has moved on to semi-independent living. She maintains informal contact with the foster family through visits and phone calls and is made welcome.

Children have the opportunity to contribute to meetings and decisions relating to their care and progress, including personal education planning meetings and statutory care planning reviews, which some do. Some young people have no interest in attending meetings or giving their views on the quality of their care experience. They simply want to get on with their lives in what they see as an ordinary family. They know how to complain but have made no complaints. One young person said, 'I know Ian well. He always talks to me and asks if I'm OK. I can ring him if I want to but I never do. I don't need to. Everything's fine.'

Children with disabilities are very well looked after by carers who are knowledgeable, patient and skilled in meeting their individual complex needs. Their health and welfare is well protected and they receive medicines and treatment as required. They have many opportunities for new experiences and enjoyment. For example, children who have had limited time away from home or school in the past, enjoy going on aeroplanes and having holidays where they encounter farm animals and horses and can enjoy paddling in the sea. With support, they attend youth clubs where they

socialise with peers and they enjoy many trips to the shops, local parks and places of interest.

Sensory equipment available in the foster home enables children with communication difficulties to enjoy a range of activities and relaxation. For example, one child relaxes to coloured lights from a special light projector before he goes to sleep at night.

Relationships between carers and children are very positive. Carers build strong bonds with children and provide clear boundaries, which help children to manage their behaviour and be clear about expectations. Consequently, children who have been restrained frequently in previous placements learn to behave in a more socially acceptable manner so that the need for restraint is significantly reduced. For example, a child who has had a number of disrupted placements is settling well with her foster family and has significantly reduced the level of assaults on others so that physical interventions are now minimal.

Children and young people learn to take responsibility for their own behaviour. None are involved in criminal behaviour and those who experiment with alcohol and drugs are well informed about the dangers of drugs and are encouraged and supported to reduce this behaviour. Despite this, one young person continues to misuse cannabis.

The percentage of children who receive alternative education provision is very high compared to the national average of children in foster care, but given the small number of children involved, no conclusions can be drawn from this comparison. In most cases, children of school age attend full-time education and some make very good progress, based on low starting points. Children receive education that meets their needs and abilities. Despite encouragement from professionals and carers, two young people are not in education, employment or training. Both have started and stopped college courses that have not held their interest. With support from the carers and other professionals, both are seeking alternative education courses, recognising that this is essential for future success in life.

## Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

Children are suitably matched with foster families that can meet their needs. Carers receive good information about the child prior to placement, and arrangements for delegated authority are clearly set out. Children have the opportunity, wherever possible, to visit the foster family before moving in. They are provided with a short profile of the foster family and a children's guide to the agency on their arrival. This document is based on a comprehensive guide to the agency but is specifically tailored to meet the needs of the child. Children and carers report it is a useful document. Children know and abide by the boundaries, routines and expectations

within their own foster family.

The agency and its carers are fully involved in professional discussions and decision making relevant to the children in their care. They make effective contributions to multi-agency planning and statutory review meetings, which inform the care and services that children receive. For example, working with education providers and professionals, the carers enabled a young person to be educated within the foster home by a visiting teacher. The young person was able to benefit from one-to-one teaching after his placement at school was disrupted.

Foster carers build effective relationships with children's families. This helps children to maintain contact with their families and promotes a sense of identity and belonging. Social workers recognise the value of foster carers' flexibility and one social worker commented, 'They support contact well and will readily make changes to fit in with the parent.'

Carers who provide short-break care maintain close liaison with families and school through a home/school communication book and phone calls prior to each short break. This ensures that they have up-to-date information about children's needs, including their health and medication needs. It enables them to respond effectively to children's needs and wishes and to provide parents with useful feedback after each short break.

Where there are differences in approach between school and the foster home, this is reported to the social worker and addressed through professionals meetings to reduce the likelihood of children receiving mixed messages or inconsistent care. Social workers say that they are impressed with the behaviour management strategies employed by the foster carers. For example, one social worker said, 'They are extremely keen on promoting her development and are working well with us. They are most definitely skilled at meeting her needs and I have no concerns about their behaviour management. They support her needs fully, 24/7.'

Foster carers report that they are very well supported and they appreciate being part of a small agency where they know the registered manager and social workers well. They say that the agency is extremely good at listening to their views and responding to requests for advice and support. Foster carers are central to care planning and decision making and their views are valued.

The supervising social worker responsible for both families has a breadth of knowledge and expertise in children's social care and this enables her to tailor her work to meet the individual needs of each foster family. All agency staff are friendly and approachable, and other professionals report that they communicate effectively, advocating well for children and young people.

Foster carers receive regular mandatory training that is refreshed periodically. This helps to ensure that their skills and knowledge remain current. For example, carers are qualified in first aid and routinely complete training in food hygiene, safeguarding, fire safety and behaviour management. This gives them the basic knowledge and skills to care for children safely. All have completed the Training,



Support and Development Standards workbook. In addition, carers receive specialist training which supports them to meet the needs of the children living with them. This includes training about individual children's complex health needs.

Recruitment campaigns have not proved successful. Routinely, applications have stalled following the initial visit. Recent positive developments mean that a prospective carer has recently submitted an application. She spoke highly of the agency's friendly responsiveness and the quality of information shared at the initial visit.

No foster carer assessments have been undertaken since the last inspection. Review reports are completed annually by the supervising social worker who seeks the views of children, social workers and where appropriate, families. This ensures that service users have the opportunity to comment on the quality of care provided by the foster carer. Evaluative reports comment on the relationship between carers and children and demonstrate that children continue to make good progress in stable, supportive families. Foster carers make a written contribution to the report, which is routinely presented to panel for independent scrutiny.

Where there are gaps in the information provided in review reports, this is not always picked up by the panel. For example, one report shows that the foster carers' adult child and her partner live in the fostering household, but makes no allusion to the impact of their presence on the children. Nor does it show that Disclosure and Barring service (DBS) checks have been taken up on those adults. These shortfalls have not been addressed by the panel. This does not demonstrate rigorous scrutiny and quality assurance of the agency's work and does not fully ensure safe practice.

In addition, review reports do not list what training foster carers have undertaken during that review period and do not always evaluate the impact of any training on foster carers' development and skills. This is not addressed by the panel either. The lack of effective scrutiny by the panel is a matter that was raised in the previous inspection. Action taken by the agency to address the shortfall in the panel's practice has not been sufficiently strong or effective. The competence of the panel therefore requires further improvement. However, there is no noteworthy impact of this shortfall on children currently in placement because the required DBS checks have been taken up by the agency and foster carers have undertaken and benefited from appropriate training.

The registered manager directly supervises social workers responsible for completing assessments and reviews of foster carers. He is also the agency decision maker. This is a conflict of roles and is not best practice. The manager does not accept that this issue is a shortfall in practice. The current arrangements do not promote effective quality assurance and decision making. Furthermore, a recommendation from the last inspection for the agency decision maker to list the reasons for his decision has not been addressed. This means that the full rationale for decision making is not always clear.

## Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **Good**

Children report that they feel safe living with their carers. There have been no allegations against carers, no disclosures of abuse and no child protection referrals since the last inspection. Shortfalls in recruitment records that were identified at the last inspection have been addressed. This means that the agency holds all the required information to demonstrate that it robustly checks the suitability of those working for the agency.

Serious incidents are rare and none have been reported in this review period. There has been one incident of a young person going missing since the agency's registration. Being mindful of the small numbers involved, this compares favourably with the national average of 10% of children going missing from other social care providers in 2015. The agency took swift and robust action to protect the missing child. This included searching for him, attempting to contact him and working effectively with other professionals. An independent return interview was conducted by a specialist agency who subsequently undertook further work with the young person aimed at promoting his safety. Working in collaboration with partners, the agency has been successful in protecting the young person from the dangers associated with going missing.

Foster carers know the children very well and, for the most part, know and respond well to the risks to their individual safety. For example, vulnerable children are very well supervised both in the foster home and in the community. This ensures that they do not go missing and prevents them from accessing roads and other dangers. Foster carers know how to promote the health and safety of young people who return under the influence of cannabis by monitoring their behaviour, ensuring that they remain hydrated and seeking advice from health professionals where necessary. They are fully aware of the dangers associated with drugs misuse and continue to provide advice and guidance to young people at risk.

Although there are no concerns that children are, or have been, at risk of child sexual exploitation and online grooming, carers have completed training on caring for children who could be at such risk. This proactive approach helps carers to develop the underpinning knowledge and understanding to recognise when children in their care may be in danger. The agency is aware that it needs to do more to ensure that this knowledge is embedded so that foster carers can guide children who use social media to do so safely. This is a key area for development because some carers are not aware that children and young people in their care regularly communicate through social media.

The provider has commissioned training in caring for children at risk of extremism, for both staff and carers, which is due to take place shortly after this inspection. This demonstrates that the provider is addressing current social concerns and preparing the agency to support any children who may be at risk of being drawn into extremist

activity.

Children's progress is regularly reviewed during monthly foster carer supervision meetings and action is swiftly taken to protect children where risks to their safety are identified. For example, foster carers work closely with children's schools. By sharing information, any concerns arising at school that might negatively impact on a child's safety and welfare are dealt with openly and quickly, through a multi-agency approach.

Written risk assessments and safer caring plans set out the particular risks to children in the foster home as well as the risks to individual children based on their known experiences and behaviour. These documents help foster carers to recognise risks to children's safety. However, the level of guidance in how to mitigate identified risks is variable. Foster carers report that although risk assessments have been reviewed, some of the risks listed as behaviour concerns for individual children have not been displayed by children for some years. This does not demonstrate that the agency uses written risk assessments as tools to maintain up-to-date and effective monitoring and management of children's individual risk-taking behaviour. There is no apparent impact of this shortfall on children's safety.

## Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **Requires improvement**

The registered manager is a qualified social worker who has many years' experience of managing and delivering children's social care. He provides appropriate, regular supervision to the two social workers, who have expertise in providing social care to children with disabilities and children with emotional and behavioural difficulties. Social workers attend appropriate training, which enhances their knowledge and skills and supports them to provide good support to carers.

The responsible individual for the agency provides direct line management and supervision to the manager. She is not a qualified social worker and has limited knowledge and experience of fostering. Consequently, the manager does not receive appropriate supervision from a competent professional. The advice and guidance that he receives do not adequately support him to deliver the best possible leadership and management.

The agency offers a small number of placements to children with diverse and complex needs, all of whom are making good progress. Leaders and managers express a clear ambition to increase the number of fostering households providing care for children with disabilities. However, action taken thus far has been ineffective.

Leadership of recruitment has not been strong and the provider's oversight, monitoring and development of recruitment strategies are not well recorded. The agency has reduced in size and capacity since the last inspection and is not

responding well to the high level of need in the locality. Apart from the recent carer application, there have been no new families recruited in the 17 months since the last inspection.

Consequently, no foster carer assessments have been undertaken since the last inspection. The worker responsible for assessments is an experienced social care worker but her experience of fostering and completing foster care assessments is limited. The agency was unable to provide evidence to demonstrate that she has undertaken further training in writing assessments since the last inspection where the need for improvement in the quality and content of assessment reports was identified.

The responsible individual monitors the operation of the service each month and reports are regularly reviewed by the management team and presented to the panel for consideration. They inform annual reports and performance data. Reports provide an overview of the service but do not provide a detailed analysis of children's experiences and progress, or of actions taken by the agency to further develop. For example, reports do not outline and evaluate action taken to recruit new carers. No formal arrangements are in place for the agency to gather the views of children and foster carers to inform service development. This was raised at the last inspection and has not been satisfactorily addressed. Attempts to engage children in discussions have proved unsuccessful, but this is not well evaluated or recorded. Provider reports indicate that children have been involved in developing the agency's website, but this is not accurate, as they have opted not to do so. Consequently, reports do not give a reliable and transparent overview of the agency and do not demonstrate that the agency is proactive in driving continuous improvement in service provision.

Furthermore, there is delay in implementing agreed actions. For example, in January 2016 it was agreed that the agency should recruit a new panel member with care experience because the current member had not attended the panel for 12 months. The pace of implementing action to progress this has been slow, but a potential candidate has now been identified and the agency has begun initial enquiries to ascertain her interest.

The registered manager makes unannounced visits to foster carers and speaks to both children and foster carers. Records of the visits are minimal and do not routinely report on the foster carer's view of the quality of supervision and support provided by the agency or on children's health and safety within the home. With no particular focus to the visits, an opportunity to use them as an additional safeguarding measure, or to drive improvement within the service, is lost.

There has been one complaint raised by foster carers who have since left the agency. The complaint was received by the agency in 2015, but it was not concluded until 2016 so is not mentioned within the agency's annual report. While the agency's review and lessons learnt will be included in the 2016 annual report, it would have been helpful to refer to the receipt of a complaint in the 2015 annual report. The carers were not satisfied with the agency's response, which focused on the needs of

the child.

The statement of purpose is available on the website. Although the document was updated in 2016, some of the information is misleading and out of date, including information about the panel composition and recruitment of new staff. The provider is required to remove the following statement: 'Ian, at the agreement of the regulatory body also fulfils the role of fostering panel Agency Decision Maker.' Ofsted does not give agreement to methods of service delivery that are outside of its remit.

Although the development of the service since the last inspection has been minimal, there is evidence of small-scale improvements. For example, the service has developed its training portfolio to ensure that training is delivered in a way that meets carers' individual learning needs. This includes one-to-one training in their own homes, where necessary.

Partnership working is good. Placing social workers report that the agency communicates effectively and contributes to children's care planning appropriately. They say that they have no concerns about the quality of care or children's safety.

## 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.