

Abacus Fostering

Abacus Fostering Limited

Suite 121, Steward Street Lofts, 69 Steward Street, Birmingham, West Midlands B18 7AF

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The fostering agency is a private limited company and was registered in 2013. The volume of recruitment since the opening of the service has been 21 carer households. Six of these have now resigned. There are currently 15 carer households approved, with 17 children and young people in placement. The remit of the service is to provide respite and short- and long-term placements for children and young people. The service has a small team of social workers who complete carer assessments, provide training, and make and support placements.

Inspection dates: 6 to 9 November 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **good**

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **good**

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 25 July 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection:

None.

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Most children and young people experience long-term stability with their foster families.
- Foster carers continue to support and help young people into adulthood.
- Children and young people overcome emotional and behaviour difficulties, thanks to the help that carers and supervising social workers give them.
- Children and young people adopt healthier and safer lifestyles with their foster families.
- Children and young people do better than previously in their education because their carers understand their difficulties with learning and give them good help.
- Children and young people feel part of their fostering families. Their carers help them collect memorabilia of their progress and experiences while fostered.
- Supervising social workers and the management team provide very regular, creative and high-quality support and training to foster families.
- Children and young people are matched well with foster families who can meet all their needs, including their need to keep in contact with their own families.
- Children and young people get good information about their carers before they go to live with them.
- Fostered and birth children feel part of the fostering agency because the agency communicates regularly and organises good activities, including charitable events.
- Assessments of new foster carers are completed thoroughly. This means that new carers are well prepared and of a good calibre.
- The manager and supervising social workers invest heavily in training and supporting carers to provide a therapeutic care style.
- Complaints and allegations from children, young people and carers are very few because carers are skilled and provide warm and attentive care.
- The manager and the registered individual are always available and are committed to the service. They review the service's work rigorously, learning from mistakes and breakdowns, as well as implementing changes effectively.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- The service's policies do not explain how physical intervention practice can fit with therapeutic care when children's behaviour is unsafe.
- Carers have not been trained in the use of physical intervention techniques.
- Staff do not ensure that records and care plans are written in a way that helps children and young people to understand their contents and what these mean for them.

- Supervising social workers' records of carer supervision and consultation are seldom used in practice by carers.
- Reports produced for placing authorities do not always show the progress children and young people make.
- Managers have not notified all serious events to Ofsted, or sent Ofsted updates to their statement of purpose.

What does the independent fostering agency need to do to improve?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person(s) must take to meet 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
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36(1) and schedule 7) This is with particular respect to notifying Ofsted of matters that the manager deems serious, such as child sexual exploitation concerns.	13/12/2017
The fostering service provider must keep under review and, where appropriate, revise the statement of purpose and children's guide, and notify the Chief Inspector of any such revision within 28 days. (Regulation 4(a)(b))	13/12/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that carer supervision meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings (NMS 21.8). This is with particular respect to providing carers with good-quality advice that is promptly available for them to refer to and use.
- Ensure that foster carers encourage children to take appropriate risks as a normal part of growing up. Children are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe, including when outside of the household or when using the internet or social media (NMS 4.4). This is with particular reference to making risk assessments, agreements and plans that are easy for children, young people and carers to understand and use.
- Ensure that all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and disputes. The fostering service has a clear written policy on managing behaviour, which includes supporting positive behaviour, de-escalation of conflicts and discipline. The fostering service's policy is made clear to the responsible authority/placing authority, child and parent/s or carers before the placement begins or, in an

emergency placement, at the time of the placement (NMS 3.8). This is with particular reference to making it clear in the agency's policy when physical intervention is allowed and to ensuring that carers are trained to methods of physical intervention that are deemed necessary.

- Ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements (NMS 26.6). This is with particular reference to using records proactively to help children and young people to see how they are doing, what they have to do, and the reasons for decisions about them.
- Ensure that the fostering service and foster carer contribute effectively to each child's placement plan review and statutory review of the child's care plan (NMS 31.7). This is with particular respect to showing in reports the significance of the child or young person's developing relationship with their carers, including how the child or young person progresses.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Most children and young people have been with their foster families for a few years. A local authority independent reviewing officer (IRO) said, 'The best outcome for [group of brothers and sisters] is that the current placement is now ratified as a long-term foster placement.' Children and young people feel truly at home, and in some cases stay beyond the age of 18. When young people have moved to live independently they still stay in touch with their carers. This enables them to continue to receive support after they have left foster care. One young person told the inspector, 'She is one of the best carers I have ever had. She listens and she trusts you. She treats you with respect. We still visit each other.'

Children and young people are well matched with their foster families. The manager and supervising social workers think carefully about children's and young people's needs before making the final decision. For example, the manager and supervising social workers give consideration to children's and young people's religious, cultural and educational needs. They consider how far from their home areas children and young people will be, and ensure that they stay with their brothers and sisters wherever possible.

Many children and young people, including parents with babies, visit their foster families before a decision is made to move in. One child said, 'The first visit I was nervous. Having more visits helped.' A young person said,

They have made me and my son welcome. [Carer] is showing me different techniques in bathing, sleeping and nappies. We are open and honest with each other and we tell each other everything.

Children and young people overcome emotional and behaviour difficulties, thanks to the help that carers and supervising social workers give them. One carer said, '[Young person] has been with us now for over two years and the improvement in his confidence, self-esteem and outlook on life has been dramatic.'

The service ensures that carers are well trained and supported, so that they can provide children and young people with the best possible care. For example, the manager and the responsible individual organised for one carer to attend specialist training in behaviour therapy for children with autistic spectrum disorder The carer said,

I learnt more about how autistic brains work, how overload happens, and how they see things differently. [Young person] is smashing – we are incredibly proud. One of his teachers at school who has not taught him for a few years does not recognise him – he is so changed – now he sits and he concentrates.

Children and young people do better than previously in their education because their

carers understand their difficulties with learning and give them good help. A child said, 'They help me with my homework.' Another child said, 'Every Friday I show [carers] my results from my maths tests and they are pleased.' All carers make, and keep up to date, an educational folder of each child's school reports, certificates, events and achievements. A carer said,

[Young person] now attends a mainstream school, having spent five years in a high security behavioural unit, and is making excellent progress socially, emotionally as well as academically.

Children and young people live with foster families who help them to see their own families. A local authority placing social worker said, 'The foster carer was very encouraging of contact between the child and his family.' Supervising social workers help children and young people to understand their relationships with their own family members and cope with the feelings of confusion that they experience. One young person said,

[Supervising social worker] helped plan me seeing my mum and my brother. She helped me get there. She and [foster carer] gave me good advice about what might happen so I decided to get a flat near [carer].

Children and young people adopt healthier and safer lifestyles with their foster families. One child's social worker said, 'This young man's growth has soared and he looks so much healthier and happier since being placed with these foster carers.' Similarly, a carer for a young person with disabilities said,

[Young person] has increased his tolerance of people and water. He likes swimming now and going 'on stage', especially doing his 'evil snigger' part! He is so pleased when he manages a new thing. For example, he tried archery at Abacus' adventure park day.

Children and young people feel part of their fostering families. For example, one carer's daughter noticed that her foster sister seemed low. Now she makes time to go cycling with her foster sister to help them bond more. The whole family makes sure that the fostered children experience lots of laughter, talking and discussion. Another young person enjoys looking at his collection of videos showing all the rollercoaster rides that his carers have taken him on. All children have memory boxes and albums where carers help them keep precious things and chart their progress and experiences.

Children and young people feel part of the fostering service as a whole. They enjoy getting together for the many activities arranged by the manager and supervising social workers. Staff produce regular newsletters containing quizzes and photos of them all. The newsletters draw everyone's attention to individual successes and good times together.

Supervising social workers and the management team provide very regular, creative and high-quality support and training to foster families. One carer described them as, 'Small and family orientated, with a skilled workforce that are very professional

and caring.' Supervising social workers visit all carers fortnightly and make a weekly phone call to them. They ensure that carers and social workers know who is 'on call' throughout the week. A carer said, 'Support has been there night and day throughout the last four years.'

Supervising social workers train and support carers to work with children and young people in a therapeutic way. Carers have become more empathic and insightful as a result. One carer said, 'I have learnt a lot with their training about bonding.' Another said, 'Sympathise – don't keep using "what?" and "why?" Don't shame a child and if they feel shame, repair it.'

Carers and supervising social workers make records and write various reports, but rarely show them to children and young people. Many records and reports do not help children and young people to understand the reasons for decisions, see the progress that they have made, or understand what is going to happen and when. Carers and supervising social workers are missing opportunities to give children and young people more help through written communications that are simple and clear.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: good

Children and young people become increasingly safe in foster care. This is because carers are well prepared and supported to help and protect them when their behaviour is risky. A carer of a 17-year-old who had experienced multiple placements said,

[Young person] no longer has unrestrained outbursts, but is able to seek support in a thoughtful and mature manner. She always lets me know where she is staying, who she is with, and maintains phone contact. She no longer smokes 'weed' and hasn't drunk any alcohol for several months. She sees her GP fortnightly. She does not go missing and has developed a very positive and trusting relationship with me. She recognises that some relationships are unhealthy.

Carers receive in-depth training in a therapeutic model for care and behaviour management. Carers have embraced this model. One carer wrote in her learning log, 'Look beneath the surface to find the root of the behaviour and let children know you're available.' Another carer wrote, 'Think about why they feel the way they feel. Connect first – meet them where they are before correcting them.' The manager and the supervising social workers develop carers' understanding and confidence in applying this knowledge to their care of children and young people. A carer said,

[Child] lashed out a bit at the six- or seven-week point. I did have good support from the manager to understand that. I was told that she would be likely to display behaviour. I would say to her, 'You don't have to be hitting me – I am here for you.' She is a lovely little girl.

Children and young people are helped and protected from people who would bully or

exploit them. Carers are sensitive and are well prepared to help children and young people with difficulties that they experience at school or outside the home. Carers prioritise children's and young people's cultural, religious, and sexual identity needs, and help them manage peer pressure. One child said, 'I'm starting to feel like I fit in.'

Professionals see that carers are successful in protecting and helping children and young people. For example, an independent reviewing officer said,

The carers manage the children's behaviour well and are able to implement fair, firm boundaries. They are very good at explaining to the children why things are the way that they are. The children are responding well and are all making excellent progress.

Even when placements end because carers have not been able to keep children and young people safe, local authority social workers are impressed with the resilience of carers. One placing social worker said,

[Carer] had a young person placed that had experienced high level of trauma and this led to quite destructive behaviours at times and missing episodes. [Carer] remained resilient and very committed, despite her feeling that she was unable to keep the young person safe. After the placement ended, she showed ongoing commitment as police have visited her home in case the young person ran back there. [Carer] has a lovely manner and a very caring nature and I wanted to acknowledge how her personality comes across and my positive experience of her.

The manager and staff take safety and child protection seriously in their day-to-day practice. A young person said, 'They are quite a good company – they check on safety and all that.' The manager and staff check prospective carers' backgrounds and carefully explore any areas of past difficulty. The independent panel chair said, 'I can't think of a time when there have been any checks missing.' Supervising social workers are alert to possible child protection concerns and always act professionally in relation to any complaints and allegations. One carer said, 'When [supervising social worker] picked up the allegation and made a referral, they were very understanding and that helped us and it was resolved in a few months.' Another carer said, 'They were instrumental in us reporting "grooming" to the police and alerting Ofsted to failings in safeguarding at [child's] previous school.'

Carers know and follow procedures for reporting children and young people who are at risk. Carers are not unnerved by risks regarding child sexual exploitation, going missing, self-harm and substance misuse. This is because of the consistent support they get from supervising social workers. Supervising social workers facilitate work with professionals so that children's and young people's safety is assured. However, some serious incidents have not been notified to Ofsted. In addition, risk assessment documents are not written in a child-friendly way that helps children and young people to understand why protective measures are imposed. Also, carers are not trained in a method of physical intervention, even though the manager has identified a link between placement breakdowns and physical violence towards carers.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The manager and the responsible individual ensure that children and young people are only matched with carers who can meet their needs. They ensure that supervising social workers see and spend time with children and young people. The manager knows children and young people and thinks of group activities that are likely to be interesting to them. She also engages them in charitable activities and involves them in improving the service. For example, one young person has devised a series of questions to test out prospective new carers, including, 'When a young person gets angry are you going to call the police straightaway?' The manager's approach helps children and young people to gain a sense of belonging to the service and to the wider society.

The manager and the responsible individual have grown the service slowly, ensuring that they recruit resilient, able and committed carers. One carer said,

Our assessment period and training was first class; informative, thorough and, most importantly for us, supportive. We were treated as professionals and felt very much a part of the 'team'. They also took the time to get to know our 'birth' children and build up a rapport with them and offer them courses and support too.

The manager and the responsible individual invest in their carers, providing them with an impressive amount of good-quality training across all aspects of fostering. They also celebrate each carer's progress by presenting every annual review of the carer to the fostering panel.

The manager constantly reviews the work of carers and supervising social workers. She shows excellent insight. She successfully engages the whole staff team in reflecting on situations, analysing areas of weakness and looking for ways to improve. For example, she now communicates to all placing social workers the service's duty and out of hours contact details. She has done this to improve inter-agency emergency work in the light of some avoidable miscommunications that have happened.

The manager ensures that supervising social workers make a significant contribution to children's and young people's care plans. As a result, a number of children are now confirmed as 'long-term placements' with their carers. The manager ensures that all records of visits are detailed, and are shared with professionals who need to read them in a timely way. However, reports of children's and young people's progress do not show how the carers' skills and input have produced progress. Similarly, supervising social workers' records of their discussions with carers contain too little advice and too few targets or strategies for carers to use and bear in mind as they care for children and young people. This means that carers do not reread or use their supervision notes to good effect.

The manager has forgotten that she is required to send updates of the service's

statement of purpose to Ofsted.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the differences made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people whom it is trying to help, protect and look after.

Using the 'Social care common inspection framework', this inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

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