

Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

Chambers Business Centre, Chapel Road, Oldham OL8 4QQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is part of a large national organisation, National Fostering Agency Limited. Alpha Plus operates from an office located in Oldham. It provides a range of foster placements, including permanent, long-term, short-term, 'parent and child' and emergency placements. At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing placements for 75 children and young people in 59 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 26 February to 2 March 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 6 June 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Placement stability and effective care planning are helping children to make sustained progress in all areas of their lives.
- Children feel safe and happy in their foster homes. Children benefit from warm, nurturing care, which helps them to develop positive attachments with their foster families.
- High-risk behaviours, for example going missing from home and child sexual exploitation, rarely occur in this agency. When such incidents do occur, the foster carers and the agency staff take suitable action to minimise harm and prevent a recurrence.
- Foster carers are supported well by the agency. Carers benefit from regular supervision, support and training.
- Many children benefit from being able to live with their brothers and sisters. When this is not possible, foster carers support children to keep in touch with their family, as agreed in the child's care plan.
- Children enjoy a wide range of activities and hobbies, and this helps them to develop their social skills, confidence and self-esteem.
- The agency is successful in achieving permanent care for children and young people.
- The agency benefits from strong and effective leadership.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Making sure that all foster carers use appropriate behaviour management strategies.
- Consistency in Form F assessments.
- Recording children's progress.
- Monitoring of the agency's records.

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
<p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. (Regulation 13(2)(b))</p> <p>In particular, this refers to the use of surveillance equipment in foster carers' homes.</p>	30/03/2018

Recommendations

- 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. (NMS 13.7)

In particular, this refers to undertaking a thorough assessment of all applicants' family history and background.
- 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. (NMS 26.6)

In particular, this refers to recording children's progress, achievements and outcomes more clearly.
- Ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. (NMS 25.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Foster carers and the agency staff know each child extremely well, which helps them to keep children's needs, safety and welfare at the centre of their practice. The agency's and foster carers' child-centred approach is clearly evidenced in the children's comments: 'I think I have found a friend for life'; 'It is good that they make me feel happy and I love that they care about me'; 'They are so understanding, fun and easy to talk to.'

Long-term planning and permanency are key strengths of the agency. Several young people have remained living with their foster families on a 'staying put' arrangement beyond 18 years of age. Additionally, almost half of the children are placed with their foster family for the long term.

Similarly, the agency has successfully recruited foster carers who can provide brother and sister groups with long-term placements. Currently, 22 children benefit from living with their brothers and sisters. Furthermore, the agency supports children to remain living with their parents by providing high-quality 'parent and child' placements.

The agency provides foster families for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and it works collaboratively with all professional bodies, for example the Home Office. This successful joint working has secured safety and stability for these children.

Leaders, agency staff and foster carers have high aspirations for the children in their care, and they work diligently to improve children's lives and experiences. All school-age children are attending suitable full-time education and making noticeable progress. A young person proudly spoke about her impressive GCSE results, which had enabled her to go to college and pursue her ambitions.

Children's education is supported by the agency's dedicated education mentor. The mentor attends all children's education planning and review meetings, and monitors each child's progress and attainment. When any barriers to a child's learning arise, the mentor responds quickly and makes sure that any additional needs are identified and provided for. Some children have benefited from having extra tuition to improve their grades and reach their full potential.

Children benefit from improved physical and emotional health. Foster carers work closely with specialist teams, such as sexual health clinics, diabetic nurses and child and adolescent mental health services. This expert guidance is helping foster carers to understand and respond to children's wide-ranging health needs.

Children enjoy an active life. They experience a range of activities, such as attending local clubs, school trips and going on holiday with their foster families. As a result, children benefit from opportunities to realise their talents and interests.

Foster carers appreciate how important it is for children to continue relationships with their parents, relatives and friends. Carers support children to keep in touch

with important people in a safe and planned way. Not only does this help children to maintain attachments with significant people, it helps them to develop a greater understanding of their backgrounds, heritage and family identity.

The agency supports foster carers well. This is achieved through monthly supervision, 24-hour support and regular carer support groups. All of the carers consulted spoke highly of the agency and its supervising social workers, reporting that there is always someone available when needed. A foster carer said, 'We get phenomenal support. Our supervising social worker is a star.'

Matching is effective. The number of long-term, successful placements reflect this. The agency's matching documents are comprehensive and consider all potential risks, as well as identifying appropriate strategies to tackle risk.

How the agency documents children's progress is an area for improvement. Although children's progress is evidenced in foster carers' files, such as supervision records, children's progress is not clearly reflected in the child's file. This is not helpful to children, or others, who may wish to access this information now or in the future.

Generally, Form F assessments are comprehensive and support safer carer recruitment. On one occasion, an assessment lacked a rigorous exploration of the applicants' family history, although this was swiftly picked up by the agency's panel. Two managers had authorised this assessment, which recommended the applicants as suitable for approval despite significant shortfalls in the assessment. This highlights some inconsistencies in Form F assessments and the quality assurance of these reports.

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

Children feel happy, safe and secure in their foster homes. A child's comments clearly reflected this: 'I am in a better place, I'm safer and I love the people I live with.'

Children's safety and welfare are the agency's priority. Staff and foster carers are alert to and manage risk well. Foster carers are provided with thorough safeguarding plans that include strategies for preventing or reducing harm. The agency's safeguarding plans can be strengthened further by routinely including the children's views and comments. The manager acknowledged this and intends to develop how children's views are reflected in these assessments.

Very few children go missing from home. When they do, the agency and carers respond quickly. Foster carers follow clear reporting and recording procedures, and work in partnership with all relevant safeguarding professionals. The agency plays a key role in all multi-agency safeguarding meeting. For example, they always attend child sexual exploitation and missing from home strategy meetings. This partnership working is enhancing children's safety.

Carers foster strong attachments with children. Children trust their carers and

understand their foster family's routines, boundaries and expectations. Foster carers nurture positive behaviour through praise and incentives. The agency support worker provides additional support to carers and children to help them to understand risk, when required, such as direct sessions on internet safety.

Through training, regular supervision and discussions with the foster carers, the agency monitors carers' behaviour management approaches. This is to make sure that any measure of control used by the carers is neither excessive nor unreasonable. The agency has a clear policy on the use of surveillance equipment in foster carers' homes. The policy is in place to protect children's privacy and to enable the agency to regulate the use of images of children. The policy states, 'CCTV must not be used as a way of supervising children and young people within the foster home or the recordings kept.' On one occasion, the agency was unsure if a carer was using CCTV in the home to monitor and supervise children. The child's risk assessment indicated that CCTV was being used. This highlights inconsistencies in the monitoring of carers' actions and children's risk assessments.

Generally, the agency deals with allegations against foster carers well. It swiftly shares concerns with all relevant safeguarding professionals, which prompts multi-agency strategy discussions and an independent investigation, when necessary. Following all investigations, the agency arranges an early foster carer review to identify any additional safeguards, such as a change in approval, training and/or an increase in home visits. On one occasion, the agency failed to carry out the recommendations from a safeguarding strategy meeting and post-allegation review. Although this is an isolated incident, it highlights further monitoring shortfalls.

All staff and foster carers receive ongoing safeguarding training. Consequently, the team and carers are alert to potential risk and they understand fully their roles and responsibilities in protecting children. Additionally, some children have received training on internet safety, healthy relationships and sexual health, and children's safety is routinely discussed at staff's and foster carers' supervision, carer support groups and team meetings. As a result, the team and carers are alert to potential risk and they have a thorough understanding of their roles and responsibilities in protecting children.

Children's welfare and safety are enhanced through consistent safer recruitment practice. Panel members and agency staff are rigorously vetted by the agency before they are appointed.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the last inspection there have been two changes in registered manager. The previous registered managers left for legitimate reasons, including promotion within the organisation.

The new manager joined the agency in November 2017. She has submitted her application to register with Ofsted, and this is currently being progressed. She is a qualified social worker and she has worked in fostering services for several years, including managing a team. Although the manager is new in post, she shows a good

awareness of the agency's strengths and its areas for development. She demonstrates a child-centred approach which underpins the agency's ethos and practice.

The agency has lost 23 fostering households in the past year. The manager has identified carer recruitment and retention as an agency priority. Furthermore, she has taken steps to recruit new carers. At the inspection, foster carers' feedback about the agency was extremely positive. They all spoke extremely highly of the agency and the support that they receive. They all said that they feel valued and listened to.

The manager is supported by a highly experienced and knowledgeable team leader. The team leader has worked for the agency for over 11 years and she is wholly committed to improving the children's life chances and experiences. Additionally, the human resources officer and the newly developed compliance team provide the manager with additional support around service development and staff recruitment.

Carers describe training as a strength of the agency. They enjoy a varied training programme, which also provides them with further opportunities to meet up with other carers. Foster carers also benefit from specialist training in response to children's specific needs, for example diabetes.

Staff benefit from regular professional supervision and annual appraisals. They said that their manager is always available when they need support and guidance. Staff are suitably qualified and receive ongoing training. Often, staff training is undertaken alongside the foster carers' training, which enhances continuity in the care provided to the children.

The agency's statement of purpose clearly describes the agency's aims and objectives. It is available on the agency's website, as well as being provided to all interested parties. The agency's children's guide provides information for young people about being fostered, who they can speak to and how to complain. The guide is accessible to children of different ages and reading ability, and it is translated into different languages when necessary. This is ensuring that children and stakeholders have a clear understanding and expectations of the agency from the start.

The manager's monitoring of the service can improve. The agency provides a high-quality service to children and foster carers. However, on occasion, this has been compromised by shortfalls in service monitoring. The newly appointed manager acknowledged these shortfalls and shows enthusiasm to develop the service and make the necessary improvements.

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 difference 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

Unique reference number: SC069335

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Registered manager: Post vacant

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