

Ascent Fostering Agency

Ascent Fostering Agency Limited

Suite 5, First Floor, Hillcrest House, 51 Woodcote Road, Wallington, Surrey SM6 0LT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Ascent fostering is an independent fostering provider that is a limited company. The agency has a therapeutic approach to supporting children and young people in foster care. The agency provides placements for children and young people who have a range of complex care needs, and offers them bespoke care and support within a fostering setting.

The agency engages with children and young people in a number of ways, including mentoring and personal development through a partnership with a locally based charity. This charity supports children and young people through mentoring and access to creative arts, sports and music.

The agency provides a range of services for children and young people, including short-term, long-term and emergency placements, parent and child placements, teenage specialist placements and sibling placements.

At the time of this inspection, the fostering agency had 28 approved foster carers supporting 36 children and young people.

Inspection dates: 2 to 8 March 2018

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: 12 November 2013

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- The agency has a strong set of core values that relate to: the provision of services; valuing and developing people; supporting foster carers; and pursuing a culture of excellence.
- The agency works closely in partnership with foster carers from the outset, with the expectation that they will work and learn with the agency to provide high-quality care. This promotes a learning environment for foster carers, staff and the children and young people placed.
- The agency has close links with and works in partnership with a local charity, which provides children, and young people with mentoring, support and skills opportunities.
- The agency has passionate, experienced and well-qualified staff who aspire to support children and young people to achieve.
- The preparation, assessment and support of foster carers are excellent, and include access to therapists, support groups and regular supervision.
- The agency places a high priority on keeping children safe. Staff have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and adopt a multi-agency approach to ensuring that children and young people are helped and protected.
- Leaders and managers are committed, passionate and forward-thinking. They regularly monitor the work of the agency, and are reflective in their approach to issues that arise, in order to improve practice.
- Children and young people make good and in some cases exceptional progress in their foster placements. Leaders and managers use an outcome tracker to identify the progress or otherwise of children and young people. The tracker measures placement stability and allows for action planning to prevent the risk of placement breakdowns.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Four recommendations are made to support minor shortfalls in respect of the following: timeliness of notifications; registration of the current operational manager; identifying the panel members' roles in minutes; and ensuring that all staff recruitment records are kept in one file. No shortfalls identified placed any children or young people at risk and their impact was minimal.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure the registered person has a system in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. The system includes what to do where a notifiable event arises at the weekend. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 57, paragraph 29.1)
- Ensure the panel chair checks written minutes of panel meetings are accurate in relation to specifying the roles of members as well as their names. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 30, paragraph 14.7)
- Ensure that people involved in carrying on and managing the fostering service are registered with the regulator. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 34, paragraph 17.1)
- Ensure the fostering service has a record of the recruitment and suitability checks which have been carried out for foster carers and those working (including volunteers) for the fostering service, which includes:
 - a. identity checks;
 - b. CRB Disclosures, including the level of the Disclosure, and the unique reference number (in line with the eligibility to obtain such checks);
 - c. checks to confirm qualifications which are a requirement and those that are considered by the fostering service to be relevant;
 - d. at least two references, preferably one from a current employer, and where possible a statement from each referee as to their opinion of the person's suitability to work with children;
 - e. checks to confirm the right to work in the UK;
 - f. where the person lived outside of the UK, further checks, as are considered appropriate, where obtaining a CRB disclosure is not sufficient to establish suitability to work with children. (Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards, page 38, paragraph 19.3)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children and young people receive highly individualised care from the moment of their referral to the agency. Leaders and managers ensure that all known information is obtained from the placing authority prior to agreeing a placement. This often means calling the allocated social worker, previous carer or family to understand the level of need. Leaders and managers complete an assessment of need, which helps them to identify if the child or young person's needs can be met and matched to a suitable family without the risk of disruption to others already living at the foster home.

Once a placement is agreed, children and young people continue to have their needs assessed and a risk assessment and placement plan are created. This detailed planning ensures that individual needs are known and clear plans are in place to meet them. Children and young people are offered a range of services to support them, including access to health and education. Wider services include mentoring, therapy, creative arts, sports and music.

The agency's strong ethos and values support inclusion, encourage excellence and provide an environment where achievements and aspirations are promoted. The agency has the feel of an extended family and this comes across strongly in the comments of foster carers, staff, leaders and managers. Children and young people are looked after in a way that complies with this value base, and are welcome to make direct contact with agency staff, leaders and managers, therapists and mentors. The agency's office is based in the area where foster carers live. Children and young people are encouraged and welcomed to drop into the office for a drink or a snack when they are attending a mentor or therapy session, or when they just feel like saying hello.

The agency sees its foster carers as part of the team and expects them to adhere to the value base and ethos that the agency strongly espouses. Foster carers say they feel valued by the agency and this is key to supporting progress for children and young people. Foster carers are expected to attend four days of therapeutic training, alongside their mandatory training. Carers are supported to care for children and young people with specialised needs. Ongoing training is available to support specific needs, such as managing difficult behaviour, the risk of child sexual exploitation and gang association. Foster carers also receive additional support, such as 'hypothesis of need' meetings, where they have reflective time to sit with a therapist and their supporting social worker, and discuss any issues, behaviours or difficulties they are experiencing. A therapist also regularly attends the foster carer support group and offers support and strategies to carers. Foster carers said that this is a great opportunity to hear how others have dealt with challenges, and that it helps them to understand behaviours better.

Staff, from leaders and managers through to administrators, know the children and young people well. Children and young people feel confident about sharing their

views about their lives, for example what is going well for them and if they are worried about anything. These views are listened to, and are helping the agency to support and shape services for the future. Children and young people who responded to a survey stated that they are well looked after by their foster carers and feel safe.

This agency works in close partnership with a local charity called Reaching Higher, which offers children a range of social, educational and recreational opportunities. Through this organisation, children can access excellent mentoring schemes for football, summer and Easter camps/play schemes, creative arts, and drama and music. Younger children also attend after-school clubs, including swimming and Cubs. Children and young people regularly go away with their foster families and experience family life, helping them to feel like they belong and are an important part of the family. The agency organises events, such as the summer barbeque, where carers can come with children and young people to meet other carers and gain networks and supports.

Children and young people experience secure and stable placements with their foster families. One commissioner stated that the agency 'rarely' has placements available because their foster carers are 'well supported' and 'placements don't break down'. Two young people have remained with their foster carers after the age of 18 under the 'staying put' scheme, to support their educational needs and promote security and consistency for them as they move into adulthood. Another young person is transferring from a residential setting to a foster home. This transition has been well managed, with regular overnight stays, visits and weekend breaks, prior to a planned move.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers are consistently thorough. Foster carers feel well prepared for the challenges that fostering brings. Children and young people benefit from their placements with foster carers who understand the impact of previous experiences on their behaviour.

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

Children say they feel safe and like living at their foster placements. They have opportunities to build and sustain positive relationships with their foster carers and families, as well as with staff from the fostering agency. The direct work which the agency does with young people helps to reduce the harm, or risk of harm, from young people's past trauma and/or abuse. The work undertaken in partnership with the placing authorities helps to keep young people safe. For example, they work together to find strategies that can be used when young people are engaged in risk-taking behaviours such as going missing.

The agency has appropriately reported incidents of young people going missing from care. It makes continual efforts to maintain contact with young people, tries to find out where they are going and who they are with, and encourages them to keep safe. Where patterns of missing are recognised and increasing, strategy meetings with placing authorities consider how to keep young people safer and increase

support if necessary.

The agency encourages children and young people to take age-appropriate risks to ensure that they grow and develop, and do not become risk averse. Young people are encouraged to become independent, for example by learning how to travel on their own in a safe way. An example of this is a foster carer advocating for her foster child to be allowed to go out to a nightclub with her friends, with a safety plan to support this arrangement.

Children and young people are given consistent support and positive messages about themselves to help build their self-esteem, confidence and self-respect. Children and young people are given safe and clear boundaries to help them manage their behaviours, and learn alternative ways of expressing themselves. Additional resources such as the mentoring schemes, activities and camps give young people opportunities to develop. The therapy available also helps young people to manage difficult feelings and emotions, and learn how to channel these feelings more positively.

Foster carers receive excellent training to support them in understanding children and young people's backgrounds and history. This level of understanding enables them to offer support, rather than become frustrated, when challenging behaviours occur. All foster carers receive training in therapeutic parenting and managing difficult behaviour. Restraint is not used; carers have learned de-escalation skills.

Foster carers receive information during their preparation training about the risks that the internet may pose to young people, for example bullying, sexual exploitation and the risk of radicalisation.

Generally, the agency has safe recruitment practice in place, although some minor shortfalls were seen. Extensive checks take place on prospective foster carers, social workers and panel members. This helps prevent unsuitable staff or foster carers from having the opportunity to harm young people. Further coordination of information, for example ensuring that all employment information is kept together in one place, will support better practice.

The agency's approach to safeguarding helps to keep children and young people safe. This comes across very clearly in the attitude of the staff, the statement of purpose, the training provided and the feedback given during this inspection. Safe care is promoted via an excellent and easily understood safeguarding policy written specifically for foster carers. The agency also has additional policies for all staff and carers, including a whistle-blowing policy. Safer caring within families is discussed with carers and there is training available on this issue. Agency staff make two unannounced visits a year to foster carers and records show that supporting social workers speak to children and young people on a regular basis, and see their bedrooms and those of foster families birth children.

The agency keeps detailed records of safeguarding incidents and reports these appropriately to the placing authority and the designated officer where required. The agency has good links with placing authorities and works collaboratively with them.

The partnership with the local voluntary sector organisation, Reaching Higher, offers excellent support through mentoring and holiday schemes, which help keep young people occupied and out of trouble, thus keeping them safer.

Foster carers' homes are checked regularly, including an initial health and safety check to ensure that they are safe environments for children and young people. This extends to risk assessments of foster families' pets, to ensure they do not pose any risks to children and young people.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency does not currently have a registered manager. There is a manager in post, who has been in post since approximately one month after the last manager left. She has completed her probationary period and has now submitted her application to Ofsted for registration. The lack of a registered manager has had a limited impact on the service. The senior management team at the agency has remained stable throughout this period, and has maintained the ethos and values of the company.

The agency has grown steadily since its inception. With this steady growth, the staff team has grown to reflect the additional work. Although social workers are busy, they have manageable caseloads and the agency is appropriately resourced to ensure that it can meet the support needs of foster carers, and ultimately children and young people.

The agency's social workers are experienced and knowledgeable, and have a high level of understanding of the behaviours children and young people may present. Staff spoken to felt well supported through induction, supervision, training and appraisal. Staff and foster carers have personal development plans identifying training needs and staff care is a high priority for this agency.

Leaders and managers regularly monitor the quality of care provided. Regular reports are sent to the regulator. These have improved over time, but would benefit from reflecting more of the progress and development of the children and young people placed. Leaders and managers recognise this, and have a plan to address this. The agency has various tools that support its understanding and assist its learning, including an annual report, foster care feedback learning and development reports, young people's feedback reports, team awaydays and the Investors in People award.

The agency routinely seeks the views of young people, foster carers, stakeholders and professionals for annual reviews. Leaders and managers analyse placement information to learn how placements end. The agency is reflective and learns from information gathered during debrief sessions that take place with carers after placements have ended. The agency also uses information from outcome trackers to convene placement stability meetings in order to consider how to stabilise placements before they break down.

There are relatively few complaints, but these are dealt with promptly and according to the agency's policy. Where there are concerns about foster carers, these concerns are appropriately reported and investigated. Independent assessors are used when the designated officer asks the agency to investigate foster carers and carers are returned to panel for any standard of care issues if necessary.

Leaders and managers have addressed the requirements and recommendations from the last inspection in 2013. This demonstrates that the agency has the capacity to learn and improve services.

All of the agency's leaders, managers and staff know children and young people well. Staff are aware of children and young people's care plans, the progress they are making and any issues they are facing. Leaders and managers know where children and young people are making progress. Outcome trackers are reviewed regularly and where concerns are raised, discussions take place to ensure that additional resources and/or services are put into place. The agency works well with placing authorities and partners to ensure that children and young people's needs are met.

This is an agency that values learning. There are opportunities for staff and foster carers to develop and the agency sees this as highly important in the effective delivery of services for young people.

The agency works collaboratively with foster carers and with other organisations. Throughout this inspection, the agency has been referred to as a 'family' very frequently. Everyone feels supported and this has helped to provide consistency and stability of placements for young people.

There is a good process for matching children and young people to carers. The matching form is an excellent tool and the proof of its effectiveness is in the stability of the placements achieved and the low rate of breakdown, despite the high level of complex needs foster carers are working with.

The agency has a statement of purpose which has recently been updated to reflect the current staff team. The agency works towards its strong ethos, mission and values. Staff and foster carers reflect this throughout the organisation.

The children's guide is a helpful document, easily understood by children and young people. However, the guide should include contact details for the Children's Commissioner and some national advocacy services. Both the statement of purpose and the children's guide should also be accessible on the agency's website.

The company is financially able to continue offering high-quality care for young people.

All case records are held electronically. The records seen as part of this inspection are clear and concise, and give a good account and record of the children and young people's stories while they are fostered by the agency.

Some of the agency's notifications of significant events have been reported to the regulator late. The agency has accepted this shortfall and has a system in place to address this. Despite the late notifications, records show that appropriate actions have been taken, and that there has been no detrimental impact on children and young people.

The agency recruits a range of foster carers, primarily to meet the needs of children and young people with complex needs. The majority of young people placed are considered to be 'harder to place' children by placing authorities, such as teenagers with complex needs and histories, sibling groups, parent and child placements and children and young people from black and ethnic minority communities.

The agency is appropriately selective and invests heavily in its foster carers. They are considered part of the team and they feel this strongly. This ethos and significant investment pays off, as foster carers are skilled, feel valued and go that extra mile to work with extremely challenging behaviours. The training programme for carers is just one area of support which reflects this investment in carers. This consists of a four-day therapeutic training course alongside other mandatory training.

The agency's fostering panel has an experienced and appropriately qualified chair. The panel is a diverse mix of lay people and professionals, some with expertise in health, education and children looked after. The panel is currently all female, although this is being considered during ongoing recruitment. The panel is offering a good gatekeeping service to the agency, and is supporting the agency to make effective, child-centred decisions. The minutes of panel meetings would be enhanced by having the roles of the attendees recorded in addition to their names.

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

Unique reference number: SC458129

Registered provider: Ascent Fostering Agency Limited

Registered provider address: Suite 5, First Floor, Hillcrest House, 51 Woodcote Road, Wallington, Surrey SM6 0LT

Responsible individual: Mark Pomell

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 0207 205 4488

Email address: mpomell@ascentfostering.com

Inspector

Christine Kennet: social care inspector



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

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