

Abacus Fostering

Abacus Fostering Limited

Suite 301/302, 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

Ofsted registered Abacus Fostering in 2013. The agency undertakes recruitment, assessment, approval and support of foster carers. The agency currently has 24 foster carers with 26 children placed.

The manager was registered with Ofsted in April 2013 and is suitably qualified.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 8 to 12 November 2021

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: 6 November 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The registered manager and staff provide a high level of support to foster carers. Supervising social workers have a manageable caseload, which means that foster carers receive the support they need to ensure that children are safe and well cared for.

Foster carers who have transferred to this agency are pleased to have done so. They describe the agency as a family. They value the small size of the agency and the ongoing support provided by the staff team.

Assessments of foster carers are thorough and of a good standard. They are analytical and give an accurate reflection of the foster carer's strengths and areas for development. Good-quality assessments of foster carers ensure that they are suitable to foster and are well matched to children. This means that children are cared for by foster carers who have the knowledge and skills to care for them. This also promotes placement stability.

The agency monitors children's progress and provides additional support to children and foster carers when needed. Children speak positively about living with their foster carers. They are settled, happy and feel part of the family.

Children have good education attendance. The agency tracks all children's school attendance and celebrates children's achievements. As a result, children are making progress in school.

Supervising social workers hold regular supervision with foster carers. This keeps the social workers up to date and informed about children's needs. Children have opportunities to share their views on the care they receive. However, children have not been supported to access and contribute to their records. This is a missed opportunity to involve children meaningfully in their care planning and to obtain their views.

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

Safeguarding incidents are few. If concerns do arise, the agency takes appropriate action. The agency is responsive to foster carers and children's needs when incidents do take place. Foster carers have access to out-of-hours support if needed.

There has been one incident of a child being restrained by a foster carer. This intervention was necessary to keep the child safe.

Foster carers were overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive from supervising social workers and the management team. This support has continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster carers reported that staff are always

available for advice. This provides stability in placements and helps foster carers cope with challenging situations.

Managers and staff ensure that appropriate actions are quickly taken to keep children safe and to manage risks. However, this good practice is not consistently evidenced in risk assessments and safer-caring plans. In some instances, paperwork is not reviewed regularly or following the placement of a new child. Because children are settled, and foster carers know the children well, this has not had a negative impact.

On the rare occasion that children go missing, foster carers respond quickly to bring about the child's safe return. The agency, however, has not ensured that return home interviews are completed. This means that children are not provided with the opportunity to explore why they go missing from home.

The panel has continued to meet online and has remained quorate throughout the pandemic. The central list has varying members with different experiences. The panel minutes capture the discussions that take place and the rationale for recommendations. Reports presented to panel are generally of good quality and the recordings of the agency's decision-making is clear. This means that suitably vetted and good-quality foster carers care for children.

Thorough selection and vetting procedures for new agency staff are in place. However, in some instances, the registered manager has not ensured that verbal verifications of references are clearly documented. This has not compromised the safety of children as the checks have been completed.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager is passionate, highly committed and creates the right environment for staff to work effectively. Staff are suitably qualified, experienced and highly dedicated to their work. They receive regular, good-quality supervision and attend team meetings. This enables staff to reflect on and develop their practice.

New workers feel welcomed to the agency and describe an extensive and supportive induction. Staff comment that managers are approachable and accessible, and staff feel valued and respected.

Foster carers have confidence in the registered manager and the support she provides. The whole staff team has worked tirelessly to ensure that foster carers feel supported to look after children in their care. This has been vital during the pandemic. Foster carers cannot speak highly enough of the agency's staff team and their commitment to them and the children.

Foster carers are well prepared for the challenges that fostering children can bring. There is a comprehensive range of training opportunities, including essential courses such as safeguarding and first aid. In addition, the manager and staff team are quick to provide additional supervision, training and support to carers when the need

arises. This ensures that foster carers have the skills to care for children. However, four foster carers have not obtained the training development standard for carers within the required timeframes.

The agency does not always rigorously challenge placing authorities when they have not provided the required documentation to foster carers in a timely manner, such as children's placement plans, care plans and delegated authority. This oversight means that some foster carers do not have all the information about children that they need.

The panel chair has not received her annual appraisal. This oversight means that managers have not assured themselves that the panel chair has met her set objectives.

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 ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))</p> <p>This relates to the agency requesting children's documentation from the placing local authority and escalating this request if this information is not received.</p>	7 January 2022

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the training, support and development standards have been attained within the expected timeframes. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 40, paragraph 20.3)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service supports their foster carers to ensure that they provide foster children with care that reasonably meets those children's needs, and supports the children's safety. This relates to ensuring that risk assessments and safer-care plans reflect the actions foster carers and agency staff should take to protect the child. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 42, paragraph 21.1)
- The registered person should ensure that all people working in or for the fostering service, and the central list of persons considered suitable to be members of a fostering panel, are interviewed as part of the selection process and have references checked to assess suitability before taking on responsibilities. Telephone enquiries are made to each referee to verify the written references. This relates to ensuring that the agency clearly documents when they verbally verify references. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 38, paragraph 19.1)

- The registered person should ensure that when a child goes missing and there is concern for their welfare, or at the request of a child who has been missing, the fostering service arranges a meeting in private between the child and the responsible authority to consider the reasons for their going missing. This relates to ensuring that the placing local authority offers children a meeting to discuss why they went missing. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 16, paragraph 5.9)
- The registered person should ensure that entries in records, decisions and reasons for them, are legible, clearly expressed, non-stigmatising, distinguish between fact, opinion and third-party information and are signed and dated. This relates to ensuring all records relating to children are written clearly, accurately and contain all relevant information. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.5)
- The registered person should 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. This relates to ensuring that children are supported and encouraged to read and contribute to their records. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 49, paragraph 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that each panel member's performance, including that of the chair, should be reviewed annually, against agreed performance objectives. Views about the chair's performance should be sought from other panel members and from those who attend panel meetings, such as prospective foster carers and social workers who present reports to panel. This relates to the agency ensuring that the panel chair receives an annual appraisal. ('The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations volume 4: fostering services 2011', page 41, paragraph 5.15)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people 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: SC457784

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Inspectors

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