

Affinity Fostering

Affinity Fostering Services Limited

Ingatestone Hall, Hall Lane, Ingatestone, Essex CM4 9NR

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is based in Essex. There has been significant but careful growth of the agency since the last inspection in 2017. Most foster carers live in Essex, London, Kent and Lincolnshire.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 118 foster carers in 70 households. The agency is supporting 120 children, including parent and child placements, disabled children and a small number of young people in 'staying put' placements. The agency provides long-term, short-term and emergency placements.

There have been some changes to management since the last inspection as both the registered manager and responsible individual have changed. However, consistency of ethos has been maintained. The suitably qualified and experienced manager registered in May 2022.

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: 15 to 19 August 2022

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

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

The independent fostering agency provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standards of good. The actions of the independent fostering agency contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people.

Date of last inspection: 10 July 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The agency's therapeutic ethos is fully embedded in all the work that the foster carers and agency staff do. As a result, this is an agency that makes a significant positive difference for the children and young people it looks after. Sometimes, the children receive care that can only be described as life-changing.

The children are meticulously matched with foster families, including the children who live in the household. Bespoke practical and therapeutic support arrangements help children and their fostering families initially settle, stay resilient and navigate tough times.

Most children are flourishing. They grow and develop as cherished members of the fostering family with a strong sense of stability, love and belonging. The foster families help children to progress well in their education and to develop confidence and aspirations. One child said that their foster carers are helping them follow their dreams. Foster carers support children to maintain optimum health. A social worker described how some children's health has been transformed due to the foster carers' excellent care. Social workers describe children as 'doing amazingly well'.

Foster carers open their hearts and homes to large groups of siblings. This enables children to be reunited with their brothers and sisters. When this is not possible, seamless arrangements ensure that the children regularly see each other and are able to share their lives. These extended family-type arrangements build new families with a lifelong commitment to the children. One child said: 'They [the foster carers] care about us and we like being together.'

The children consistently spoke of the joy of being part of the fostering family. They enthusiastically described the enjoyable activities that they do, the animals that they care for and how they enjoy the company of their foster brothers and sisters. Children enjoy regular activities, fun days out and the annual theme park holiday that the agency organises. The good-quality foster carer records and life-story books mean that later in life the children can reflect positively on their memorable moments and living with their fostering family.

Foster families and agency staff work exceptionally well as a team to support all the children. The agency staff mentor children who are out of education to return, and they provide emotional support. The agency has a range of support systems to promote enjoyable activities and learning, including the 'pot of gold' fund for each child, including birth children, to do activities of their choice as a family.

The therapeutic approaches and commitment to inclusive practice form a golden thread throughout the service. Children who need additional support with their emotional well-being are supported to identify their own needs and be active in their resolution.

The commitment to helping children have their voices heard is embedded at every level in the agency. No opportunity to seek children's feedback is missed. The children openly share their views, confident that their opinions are valued and acted on. For example, the children's voices group developed some staff recruitment exercises. In cases when the children judged that candidates' responses were not sufficiently child-friendly, the candidates were required to resubmit their application. The children's voices group is encouraged to be politically active as care experienced children and young people. The members have written to the previous children's minister and created a video about why children's reviews should not be held during school time. This video was also shared with the children's commissioner.

Children and foster carers receive bespoke care and support which they regard highly. Foster carers and staff describe the agency as a small family and, as such, they celebrate the children's achievements together. One child said: 'I love [the agency]'. Another child said: '[The agency] is about the people.' The comprehensive support offered to children looked after is mirrored for birth children and foster carers. One foster carer who suffered a bereavement said that the foster carers and agency staff wrapped her and her child 'in a blanket of love and support' and are still doing this. Another foster carer said: 'I just love [the agency]. The staff always put the child first.'

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

Foster carers' assessment, recruitment, supervision and training emphasise the importance of safeguarding and building safe environments for children to flourish. The carers are therefore alert to and act to minimise risk. All foster carers and staff know their safeguarding responsibilities and how to raise any concerns within and outside the agency. The regular presence of the agency director and senior managers means that they are accessible and known. Consequently, foster carers say that they would not hesitate to go directly to them about any concerns.

The children trust their carers. They can talk to them and feel confident that they will be listened to and heard. One child described how their foster carer ensured that their school addressed bullying when teachers had failed to act. Children like the time that they spend with the agency staff. As a result, children identify them as people outside the fostering family who they feel confident to talk to. This helps keep children safe.

Foster carers create families in which children feel safe and emotionally held. Consequently, children make disclosures to their carers about their past experiences. One social worker said: 'They [the children] have had the chance to tell their story and be believed.' The agency commissions bespoke therapeutic packages of support to fostering families to help them through these difficult times.

The agency staff ensure that risks are well understood at the point that children move in. These risks are kept under constant review and mitigated when possible.

The foster carers act swiftly and appropriately to support children's safety when children go missing from home or are involved in risky situations. Agency staff appropriately escalate issues when there are concerns that local authorities are not taking clear and decisive action to protect children. Weekly risk management meetings mean that agency staff have strong and effective oversight of any safeguarding matters.

Any concerns regarding the care and support provided to children are shared with relevant partner agencies and robustly investigated. The agency presents any standards of care investigations to panel. The good use of panel provides additional and transparent scrutiny. There is constant reflection and a search for lessons learned to drive improvement.

Children who are fostered, birth children and foster carers feel safe and cared for by the agency. They know that the agency staff will always ensure that they are all supported to stay safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The newly registered manager and the responsible individual have provided a sense of continued stability and commitment. The high aspirations for children, carers and everyone involved with the agency are clearly modelled and shared from the top down.

The agency's value statement is 'enhancing and empowering young people's lives'. The staff and carers fully understand and consistently embrace this value statement in their day-to-day practice. Staff said that the agency believes that 'well-doing comes from well-being'. Children, carers and staff describe an organisational culture of nurture, value, respect and empowerment from the first point of contact with the agency. This nurtures highly positive outcomes for children.

The agency provides an impressive training and support offer for foster children, birth children, foster carers and staff alike. Foster families benefit from family fun days, an annual national conference, a children's annual holiday and regular targeted support groups in addition to the core training offer. One carer said: 'They [agency staff] always have your back. I seriously would never go anywhere else.' Another carer said: 'It is almost impossible to document everything that the staff do for us. They are always there for us and the children. We feel honoured to be a part of the agency.'

The managers encourage reflective practice and creativity at every level, with a consistent drive to do better by children. The staff and carers particularly value the role that foster carers and care experienced children and adults play in policy development, training and the panel. This helps the agency to provide guidance to carers which reflects the reality of the challenges faced and to keep a keen focus on what matters most to children.

The agency staff work exceptionally well in partnership with outside agencies. One social worker said: 'It is one of the best agencies I have ever worked with.'

The clear and effective management structure ensures defined lines of accountability without unnecessary hierarchy. Every child, staff and foster carer knows that they can ring the manager or director and anyone in this agency and that the person they speak to will have time for them. The high involvement and commitment from staff, children and foster carers help the manager to have an unusually strong understanding of people's experiences of the agency. This, combined with highly effective monitoring and oversight, means that the agency operates like a well-oiled machine which keeps it moving forward and ever-developing.

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: SC469688

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Inspectors

Joanna Heller, Social Care Inspector
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