

# Amicus Foster Care

Amicus Foster Care Limited

St Werburghs Community Centre, Horley Road, Bristol BS2 9TJ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

Amicus Foster Care is a small private limited company which has an office based in a community centre in Bristol. The service covers Bristol, South Gloucestershire, Swindon, Wiltshire, North Somerset, Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset and Somerset. The service currently supports 28 fostering households, and there are 40 children placed.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since December 2021.

### Inspection dates: 5 to 9 September 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 **good**

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:** 2 July 2018

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

A strength of the agency is the team's skill in helping children to build trusting and loving relationships with their foster carers. Children who the inspectors spoke to said that they feel very safe with their carers and are happy. One child said that they would not have their positive life plans without their carers' support.

Overwhelmingly, children make considerable progress in all areas of their life. Educational outcomes for children are outstanding. Some continue their learning at university, others move on to training and employment. Staff and carers have high expectations for children. They carefully track children's progress to ensure that services and support are provided in a timely way.

Children take part a varied range of activities. They join local groups, such as scouts, football clubs and gymnastics. Carers encourage children to live active and healthy lifestyles. Children help to organise and record the agency-led activities for families. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, the agency developed an excellent range of activities for children and families to engage in online. This led to an extensive online and face-to-face provision for children to help them to engage in activities that they might not otherwise.

Children who experience communication difficulties are very well supported by the agency. A member of the team, who has specialist skills in communication, provides outstanding support that builds children's confidence and helps them to have their voice heard. Children's activities are inclusive to ensure that all children can be involved and feel valued.

Children's voices are heard loudly within the agency. The team consistently seeks out children's views and responds effectively to their suggestions. Children provide meaningful and honest feedback to the fostering panel for carers' reviews. The agency is constantly shaped by children's needs and wishes.

The agency has strong mechanisms to support children once they reach adulthood. Many children remain with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements. The agency provides exceptional support to carers to ensure that children can remain in their foster homes after the age of 18. When children choose to live independently, the team continues to provide them with significant financial, practical and emotional support. This ensures that these challenging transitions meet the needs of each child.

The agency provides high levels of support for children with additional cultural needs. One unaccompanied asylum seeker has been supported to build relationships with other young people and adults from their country of origin. This helps them to explore their cultural heritage, including language, faith and food.

The agency offers exceptional life-story work for children, which is predominantly funded by the agency. This is an extensive piece of work over 12 to 16 weeks. Children have been able to understand and make sense of their childhood journey. Most importantly, they have developed self-esteem and the confidence to voice their wishes. One child has been able to make positive choices that are no longer aligned to those of his birth family. These interventions have measurable positive outcomes for children.

Most children have very good health outcomes. When children need support with their health, swift referrals are made to the appropriate services. Carers of one young person, who has previously sofa surfed, encourage them to cease smoking tobacco and cannabis misuse. Although the young person told the inspector that they do not think they can ever stop smoking, they are trying to reduce their use due to their carers' support.

There is evidence that carers strongly advocate for children. They robustly challenge the local authority to ensure that plans meet children's needs. For example, one child received mathematics tutoring after significant challenge to the local authority by their carers. When support is not forthcoming, the agency fills this gap to ensure that children have what they need to thrive.

Children's relationships with their families are valued and promoted. There is very good evidence of birth families being included in children's journeys when appropriate. Inspectors saw photos of a child's first day at school, which was sent to their mother by the carer. Children's relationships with their siblings are protected and they are placed together whenever possible.

Children's achievements are celebrated. Their artwork adorns the walls in the agency's offices and the community hall cafe. Children's academic performance is recorded well.

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

There has been a child safeguarding practice review (CSPR) due to two children placed by the agency experiencing sexual abuse by their male carer. The CSPR found good practice across agencies in how they worked with children, the carers and each other, and there were no indicators prior to the allegations made that the placement was not safe. Staff report feeling well supported through this episode and learning and training has taken place to raise the skills and awareness of intrafamilial sexual abuse.

The agency has good safeguarding procedures. Staff and carers are knowledgeable about how to keep children safe. They know who to contact should concerns arise about the welfare of a child.

When children disclose concerns about the care they receive, these are taken seriously by the agency. All professionals respond swiftly and effectively to prevent

further harm to children. Matters are referred to police and safeguarding bodies. Internal investigations are thorough and lead to learning.

Children rarely go missing from home. When they do, there is a clear protocol that is followed to locate them and return them home. Multi-agency meetings are held when a child persistently goes missing from home. Plans are consistently adapted to reflect the changing needs of the child. This helps to reduce future incidents. Supervising social workers routinely assess the risk of child exploitation for children who frequently go missing from home.

The impact of bullying and discrimination on children is fully assessed and considered by the agency. The diversity within the agency provides children with a range of positive role models with whom they can share experiences. This also helps children to treat others with respect.

The agency has safe recruitment practices with respect to employing staff. There are thorough induction processes that prepare staff appropriately for working with children and supporting carers.

Safer care plans are robust documents that detail the specific needs of the child. They are completed in a timely way to ensure that pertinent information is available. There is evidence that these plans underpin the care that children receive and are reviewed regularly.

Restraint is rarely used. On the one occasion when a child was restrained, it was proportionate and was needed to keep the child from hurting themselves or others. Records of this incident are thorough and detailed. Learning has taken place due to effective management oversight.

The agency has adopted a comprehensive programme of therapeutic support. This is threaded through every part of the agency. There is evidence that this has had a significant positive impact on staff's morale, skills, and knowledge of children who have suffered trauma. Consequently, the whole team of staff provide children with excellent levels of therapeutic care that helps them to process their past trauma. By valuing and supporting children's emotional well-being, the agency creates outstanding outcomes for children.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good**

The staff team is cohesive and collaborate in its practice. Inspectors spoke with staff, who feel that there have been positive developments since the last inspection. These have led to their views being sought and heard. Feedback from all practitioners involved with the agency is overwhelmingly positive.

Foster carers gave extremely positive feedback to inspectors about the support they receive from the agency. They value the expertise of the supervising social workers. They told inspectors that there is always someone who they can speak to if they

have concerns at any time of the day or night. Carers also highly praise the administration team for responding to their queries effectively.

Managers ensure that staff have access to and engage in regular good-quality supervision. Records show that reflective conversations take place about practice concerns and plans are adapted accordingly. Staff well-being is thoroughly monitored and promoted during these sessions.

The assessment of two prospective foster carers has not been robust enough. Issues identified in the assessment process have not always been fully explored. One applicant's assessment continued virtually, despite the lifting of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Therefore, opportunities to test identified vulnerabilities have been missed.

Furthermore, there is a lack of rigorous recording during the prospective foster carer assessment process. In one example, notes of the applicants' assessment were missing from the carers' records. During the inspection, it was difficult for the agency to demonstrate the thoroughness of the assessment process and exploration of the topics covered.

Management oversight of the assessment of prospective carers is not consistently well recorded. Records do not always capture the rationale for key decisions. This includes the decision not to ascertain references from significant people and to proceed with the placement of a child when the carers had been visited on very few occasions by the agency. Despite these shortfalls, this particular child is thriving.

The agency has a conscientious and experienced panel. However, quality assurance mechanisms regarding assessments and reports presented to panel require strengthening. The panel feeds back verbally to social workers about the quality of their reports. Standards could be further improved if this feedback was recorded and disseminated to the team.

The competing roles of the agency decision-maker and registered manager being undertaken by the same individual requires consideration. There is a need for greater objectivity during the approval process and when reviewing foster carer competencies. The agency responded to elements of these concerns by making changes to supervision and oversight of the assessing social worker during the inspection.

Carers have access to a range of quality training. Additional specialist training is made available to carers, particularly when the needs of children require it. However, carers do not consistently complete mandatory training in a timely way. Concerns were raised for one set of carers in three sequential panel reviews.

Moves to homes are overwhelmingly well planned and there are few unplanned endings. Children are given good-quality information about carers to put them at ease. Introductions are sensitive and at the child's pace. However, matching considerations of whether carers can fully meet the needs of a child are weak.

Records are not comprehensive, which undermines the assessment process. This has had a negative impact on one child, whose placement only lasted a few days.

Leaders and managers have very positive relationships with other agencies. These are built on good communication and respectful challenge. These relationships have led to excellent outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers at the agency are well respected and have children's best interests as their core ethos. During the inspection, inspectors were impressed by their innovation and commitment to the welfare of children. They continually drive improvements in care and have high aspirations children.

## 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 may carry out an assessment of any person who applies to become a foster parent and whom they consider may be suitable to become a foster parent ("X"), and any such assessment must be carried out in accordance with this regulation. (Regulation 26 (1))</p> <p>In particular, the registered person should ensure that the assessment of prospective foster carers is robust. Sufficient face-to-face visits should take place to satisfy assessment queries. Recordings of assessments should be detailed and saved on the applicant's file.</p>	30 November 2022
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times, and</p> <p>before making any decision affecting a child placed or to be placed with a foster parent due consideration is given to the child's—</p> <p>wishes and feelings (having regard to the child's age and understanding), and</p> <p>religious persuasion, racial origin and cultural and linguistic background. (Regulation 11 (a)(b)(i)(ii))</p>	30 November 2022

In particular, the registered person must ensure that matching documents are detailed and include a clear rationale for placing a child with a particular foster carer.	
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## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that all foster carers complete mandatory training in a timely way. When additional training is required, carers should be supported to complete this so that they continue to meet the needs of each child they care for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 40, paragraphs 20.3 and 20.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering panel and decision-maker provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service regarding the quality of assessment reports. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 52, paragraph 26.6)

## 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:** SC389720

**Registered provider:** Amicus Foster Care Limited

**Registered provider address:** 141 Englishcombe Lane, Bath BA2 2EL

**Responsible individual:** Mark Brady

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## **Inspectors**

Penelope Kutz, Social Care Inspector

Katie Ratcliffe, Social Care Inspector

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