

# Apex Fostering Limited

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Brickfield House, High Road, Thornwood, Epping CM16 6TH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

## Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered in July 2021 and is privately owned. It provides a wide range of placements, including parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 18 fostering households and 30 children being cared for by foster carers.

The manager registered with Ofsted in May 2023.

### Inspection dates: 7 to 11 August 2023

<b>Overall experiences and progress of children and young people,</b> taking into account	<b>requires improvement to be good</b>
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	requires improvement to be good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	requires improvement to be good
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The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

**Date of last inspection:** 25 April 2022

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** requires improvement to be good

**Enforcement action since last inspection:** none

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good**

Children receive good care from well-supported foster carers. However, shortfalls in the functioning of the fostering panel and a failure to follow decision-making procedures around the approval of a foster carer mean that the agency requires improvement to be good.

These shortfalls occurred before the registered manager was appointed. There have been improvements in practice across the agency since the manager has commenced their role. She has taken action to rectify shortfalls identified during the inspection.

Foster carers help children to feel part of their family and to experience a sense of belonging and stability. A child said, 'Living with mum and dad is the best thing I have ever done.' Another child said, 'Nothing could be better, it is perfect.'

The registered manager has improved processes for identifying the right fostering households for children. Children receive good introductions to their new homes. However, the agency does not provide children with information about the fostering household in a child-friendly way.

Care is well planned. Foster carers are described by professionals as 'going above and beyond expectations' and being 'very dedicated to children'. There are excellent examples of foster carer records for children written in a child-friendly way that convey warmth and pride and celebrate children's achievements. Consequently, children feel valued.

When information is required from other professionals, the agency staff are tenacious in obtaining this to ensure that foster carers have a good understanding of children's needs.

The agency provides homes for children to live with their brothers and sisters. Professionals have noted the foster carers' dedication and perseverance in helping children to improve the relationships that they have with their brothers and sisters. Foster carers support children to see family members and people who are important to them. There are positive examples of foster carers working well with family members as part of planning for children to return home. One family member said, 'The carer did everything that was asked of her and went above and beyond expectations.'

All children are in education. Education provision is considered at the point of referral so that children can maintain their school placement when it is in their best interests. Foster carers are good advocates for children. This ensures that children get the support that they need to progress educationally.

Foster carers receive specialist training to meet children's complex health needs. This includes one foster carer working closely with health professionals and facilitating a high number of medical appointments and care following a child's medical procedures.

Children who need additional support receive this quickly. Foster carers support children to access speech and language therapy and counselling based on the child's individual needs. Foster carers engage in consultations when appropriate to obtain strategies and to develop a more in-depth understanding of the child and how they can respond to the child's past trauma. This supports children to feel safe and cared for.

Foster carers understand the importance of promoting children's identity and cultural needs. This is well supported by the agency through good-quality training.

The agency arranges regular fostering family days out based on children's feedback about what they like and would enjoy doing. Children join events at animal parks and go to discos and on dinosaur walks where they can share new experiences with other children in foster care.

Medication is stored safely. Foster carers keep accurate records of medication that has been administered. This assists effective management oversight. When possible, children are empowered to administer their own medication.

### **How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good**

Panel members still lack the required curiosity and in-depth exploration of issues identified during assessment. This does not ensure that foster carers are suitable for the role. The new manager identified this area of development and has arranged training for panel members, some of which took place before this inspection.

All foster carers have completed safeguarding and first-aid training. The agency supports foster carers to identify and attend other relevant training to meet children's individual needs. This is captured in foster carers' personal development plans. However, not all adult members of the fostering household have completed safer caring training. This does not provide them with a full understanding of safer caring practices.

On one occasion, foster carers have used cameras in the home to help supervise children due to a high level of physical aggression. This was not captured in any plans. As a result, the use of this was not regularly reviewed to ensure that it was still necessary and least restrictive.

Recruitment of staff is thorough. All checks are carried out and verified before staff begin employment at the agency.

The agency has had a minimal number of safeguarding incidents. All notifiable events have been shared with Ofsted, and the agency has taken appropriate and timely action. This includes reporting the two incidents of unauthorised absence quickly and in line with the child's care plan.

Children can share their worries with their foster carers. Foster carers have been supported to develop a range of ways in which children can do this, including through sensitive conversations, writing their worries down or indicating their feelings through the use of a 'worry monster'.

Foster carers are vigilant about safeguarding issues that affect the children they are caring for. Guidance is contained in clear and concise safer caring household plans and individual risk assessments. These contain measures for reducing risks of online abuse and responding to self-harm.

Supervising social workers provide helpful guidance directly to foster carers and children on developing ways for children to manage emotions. This includes mindfulness techniques and affirmation cards. A child spoke about how they use these when struggling with their emotions.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good**

The post for a registered manager was vacant for over one year. The new manager, who registered with Ofsted in May 2023, has improved practices in relation to staff supervision, case records and placement decision-making. She provides good management oversight and challenge of the quality of recording and practice. Effective systems are in place for monitoring incidents and the statutory checks required of foster carers.

Before the new manager commenced in their role, there were serious shortfalls in implementing fundamental practice of panel and foster carer approval processes that keep children safe. This includes placing a child with a fostering household, after fostering panel, but a day before the agency decision-maker had approved the new applicants.

On one occasion, panel convened and made a recommendation for approval of one foster carer without being quorate with a social worker present. This was not identified by the panel chair, the agency decision-maker or anyone in the agency. This agency was only made aware of this shortfall during the inspection. This practice is not in line with regulatory requirements and does not ensure an expert knowledge and understanding of fostering was available to inform the recommendation for approval. Furthermore, this error, and failure by the agency to identify this shortfall, reflects the lack of expert knowledge in this agency at that time. This shortfall is mitigated as the foster carer is not currently caring for any children.

There have been three agency decision-makers in over a six-month period from the agency. A new and permanent agency decision-maker is now in post. However, additional arrangements will need to be made to ensure that a suitable agency decision-maker is available to take on this role for legacy cases that the current agency decision-maker was involved in assessing.

The manager receives regular, good-quality supervision with an appropriately qualified external consultant who is also offering regular practice sessions with agency staff.

Leaders and managers lead an inclusive culture at the agency. Staff and foster carers feel valued and listened to. Supervising social workers enjoy their roles and feel they can make a difference to children. Panel members are diverse and bring a range of perspectives that assist a better understanding of meeting identity needs of 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 registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p>the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and</p> <p>the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency, carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that children are not placed with foster carers until they are approved by the agency decision-maker.</p>	14 August 2023
<p>No business may be conducted by a fostering panel unless at least the following meet as the panel—</p> <p>either the person appointed to chair the panel or one of the vice chairs,</p> <p>one member who is a social worker who has at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience, and</p> <p>three, or in the case of a fostering panel established under regulation 23 (5) four, other members, and</p> <p>where the chair is not present and the vice chair who is present is not independent of the fostering service provider, at least one of the other panel members must be independent of the fostering service provider.</p> <p>A fostering panel must make a written record of its proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations. (Regulation 24 (1)(i)(ii)(iii) (2))</p>	1 September 2023

<p>The functions of the fostering panel in respect of cases referred to it by the fostering service provider are—</p> <p>to consider each application for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to be a foster parent,</p> <p>where it recommends approval of an application, to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given,</p> <p>to recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent, and whether or not the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.</p> <p>In considering what recommendation to make under paragraph (1), the fostering panel—</p> <p>may request the fostering service provider to obtain any other relevant information or to provide such other assistance as the fostering panel considers necessary. (Regulation 25 (1)(a)(b)(c) (2)(b))</p> <p>In particular, the fostering panel should provide effective challenge when more information is required to inform a recommendation about an applicant's suitability.</p> <p>This requirement was raised at the last inspection and is restated.</p>	<p>1 September 2023</p>
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## Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that appropriate training on safer caring is provided for all members of the foster household, including young people of sufficient age and understanding. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.9)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers respect the child's privacy and confidentiality in a manner that is consistent with good parenting. In particular, ensure that any use of monitoring or surveillance systems is the least restrictive method of managing risk and its use is regularly reviewed. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 3.5)
- The registered person should ensure that children are given information about the foster carer before arrival in a format appropriate to their age and understanding. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 11.3)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service's decision-maker is a senior person in the fostering service or is a trustee or director of the fostering service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 23.12)

## **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:** 2635545

**Registered provider:** Apex Fostering Limited

**Registered provider address:** Abacus House, 14 to 18 Forest Road, Loughton  
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## **Inspectors**

Trish Palmer, Social Care Inspector  
Paula Edwards, Social Care Inspector

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