

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 23 fostering households and 33 children being cared for by foster carers.

The manager registered with Ofsted in July 2024.

Inspection dates: 4 to 8 November 2024

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	good
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	good
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	good
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The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 7 August 2023

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: good

The strength of this agency is the high level of support they offer to their foster carers. Supervising social workers know fostering families well. Most children enjoy long-term stability with the option to remain after they reach 18 years of age. Children are regularly supported to live with their brothers and sisters. Professionals agree that children are safe.

A foster carer said, 'It is a small agency and they are hands on. I really appreciate all of the support.' Another said, 'I have a lot of respect and admiration for Apex; it is like a big family to me.'

Children benefit from trusted and stable relationships with their foster carers, who know them well. Consequently, many children feel at home and part of a family. This helps children to develop a sense of permanency.

Children do well in education. Foster carers meaningfully and sensitively advocate on behalf of children to ensure that they receive educational support from a provision that can meet their needs. One child had been out of education for three years. They were supported to work alongside a carefully matched, care-experienced tutor. The progress the child made was so significant that they are now due to attend a mainstream school.

Newly approved foster carers unanimously said that they felt welcomed into the agency. The foster carers benefit from 'preparation to foster' training alongside the assessment process. The foster carers described the assessment process as an enjoyable experience.

Professionals, such as social workers and independent reviewing officers, are consistently positive about the care that their children receive and the progress that children make. One child's independent reviewing officer said their child was a 'different child' since living with their carer. Another child's independent reviewing officer said, 'This placement is a benchmark really. Every child needs as warm and caring carers as these children have had.'

Commissioners shared positive feedback about effective communication with the agency. One commissioner said that they felt that the agency had an outward-looking approach: 'They always strive to be better and improve and are always open and transparent.'

Foster carers take children on memorable holidays and they do activities together. One child visited Thailand, and other children have been encouraged to windsurf and join youth clubs. Having shared experiences helps children to build positive memories and stronger connections to their foster carers.

The quality of recording is generally good. However, some foster carers' logs are not as detailed as they could be. Additionally, some social work assessments are not written in a child-friendly form and use words such as absconding. They have at times included value judgements that are not evidence based. This is not in line with the agency's values. This does not help foster carers to empathise with children's experiences and support children to understand their life story if they wish to read their records.

Children's moves into their homes are generally well considered by social workers. However, there have been two occasions when new carers have been matched with children who are subject to complex parallel criminal and public law proceedings. On both occasions, there was no explicit consideration of specialised training for the carers to help them to understand the requirements of the courts in terms of their carer recordings. The manager has since addressed this gap and plans to provide bespoke training with both sets of carers.

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

Children said that they feel safe in their homes. Foster carers understand the risks of social media and internet use and help children to understand how to stay safe.

Staff at the agency provide effective out-of-hours support to carers. Foster carers said that they appreciated that the agency staff would be there for them at times of crisis. One foster carer said that they had been offered 'amazing support'. Carers appreciate that supervising social workers know them and their children. One foster carer said that they never felt blamed and that the agency 'seek solutions to problems rather than bouncing them back as your problem'. This helps the carers to continue to provide a secure and stable home for the children they care for.

Children rarely go missing from their homes. When they do, their carers report them as missing and follow an agreed protocol. Carers search for children, call them and liaise effectively with the police and the child's social worker.

Foster carers adopt a therapeutic model of care when caring for the children, and they encourage positive behaviour. They understand children's triggers and use de-escalation techniques effectively. Consequently, there has been no need for physical holds. This helps children to continue to flourish and maintain positive relationships with their carers.

Foster carers receive and attend relevant mandatory training within the required timescales. This helps to ensure that foster carers have the relevant skills and qualifications to meet children's needs.

Safer recruitment is followed when carers are assessed. Social workers undertake unannounced visits to the foster carers, and children are seen and spoken with. Children know who their foster carer's supervising social worker is and what their role is. A regular review of health and safety checks helps to ensure that the environment is safe for children.

Overall, children's risks are understood and managed well by their foster carers. However, children's individual risk assessments are not consistently updated when risks change or new vulnerabilities emerge. At times, supervising social workers have lacked professional curiosity and analysis in their risk assessments. This does not support the foster carers to have a good understanding of how the child's past trauma could have contributed to their current vulnerability and presenting behaviour.

Investigations into allegations are swift and effective. The agency communicates with safeguarding professionals and follows procedures. This process helps to ensure that children are listened to and safeguarded and that foster carers are treated fairly. However, there has been one occasion when they have failed to notify Ofsted. While this has had no impact for the child, it does reduce the level of oversight from a regulatory perspective.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The agency is led by an appropriately qualified and experienced manager who is child-centred and reflective. She has a strong vision for the agency and an effective plan to address areas of development. She recognises that there has been some inconsistency in the staff and management team and has worked hard to build carers and staff's trust and respect. The time she has taken to establish this has enabled her to begin to make the necessary changes to the agency without destabilising staff or carers.

The responsible individual is equally as tenacious and value-driven as the manager. Together, they provide consistency for the team based on the agency's core values.

Fostering panel members are suitably experienced and qualified. The panel list is diverse and includes a panel member who is care-experienced. The panel chair is suitably experienced and manages the meetings well, ensuring everyone's voice is heard when reaching recommendations. There is a positive relationship between the panel members and the agency staff, aiding continual improvement.

The agency provides good-quality support to foster carers, which benefits them and the children. Foster carers receive peer support and attend foster carers' meetings to share good practice and gain advice from each other. Children's day-to-day experiences are enhanced because of this continued support. Foster carers feel empowered and more confident in their roles. They unanimously said that a member of staff from the agency is always available to help. They spoke of this as a 'lifeline' that has helped them to understand and articulate their experiences of the loneliness and vulnerability of their roles at times.

The manager is relatively new to the post. Before she registered with Ofsted, there was some inconsistency in decision-making processes. This resulted in a delay in addressing cumulative concerns about one carer's practice. Since commencing her

post, the manager has ensured swift oversight of the concerns. However, this was a missed opportunity to challenge and hold the carer accountable at an earlier stage.

Staff are highly complimentary about the support that they receive from the registered manager and responsible individual. When speaking about the manager, one supervising social worker said, 'She is just a phone call away. She works collaboratively but makes you take ownership, and I respect her for that.' Another employee said that they had 'never been treated so well,' and, 'The manager and responsible individual always give praise and are very motivating people.'

The provider has met all three requirements and four recommendations from the previous inspection.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that children's safety and welfare are promoted in all fostering placements. This specifically relates to ensuring that risk assessments are updated regularly and dynamically and provide guidance for foster carers on the current risks. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', paragraph 4.1)
- The registered person should ensure that a system is in place to notify, within 24 hours, persons and appropriate authorities of the occurrence of significant events in accordance with regulation 36. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 29.1)
- The registered person should ensure that they only suggest foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and manage the impact of the placement on the existing household. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. In particular, when considering placing children with new carers where court proceedings are complex, social work decision-making should be clear regarding the rationale about how the carers will meet the children's needs and the expectations regarding training for foster carers. This should consider the standard of records required to meet the requirements of court reporting and ensure training needs are explicitly met. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should ensure that the manager regularly monitors all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, identify any concerns about specific incidents and identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.2)
- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way that will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children should be actively encouraged to read their files, apart from necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 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: 2635545

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Inspector

Majella Russell, Social Care Inspector

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