

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 20 foster carers, with 38 children placed.

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

Inspection dates: 20 to 24 January 2025

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: 8 November 2021

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children have warm and nurturing relationships with their foster carers. Many of the children have lived with their foster carers for a significant period and feel part of their fostering families. One child said, '[Name of foster carer] has made my experience so enjoyable.' Another child said they were very happy living with their foster carer. Over half of the agency's children are living with their brothers and sisters, which further enhances their sense of belonging.

Permanency for children is a strength of the agency. Many of the children are living with their foster carers under long-term plans. One set of foster carers, with support from the agency, are in the process of adopting the children they care for. In addition, the agency promotes staying put arrangements for young people after their 18th birthday. This enables young people to have continued support into early adulthood.

There is careful consideration and planning by the agency before a child moves in with a new foster family. Children are welcomed into their foster homes sensitively and are provided with a memory box to capture their journey. A dedicated and experienced referrals officer ensures that children are only placed with foster carers who can meet their needs. The agency is continually reflecting on its practice to ensure care planning arrangements for children are effective.

When a child's placement is ended, the registered manager and foster carers work alongside the placing local authority to achieve a smooth transition. After each ending, the registered manager carries out reflective learning to explore the reasons and plan how to prevent future endings. As a result of this practice, care planning for children has been developed.

All children are engaging in education and making good progress. One child who has not been in school for over a year is now attending full time and working above their age-expected targets. Foster carers and supervising social workers attend all meetings for children and advocate to ensure they receive the right support. Foster carers have high aspirations for children and encourage them to reach their potential. For example, one child is being supported by their carers to apply for university.

Foster carers ensure that children's health needs are met. They support children to access local health services, including GPs, dentists and opticians. As a result this contributes towards children leading healthy lifestyles.

Children enjoy a range of activities with their foster carers, including family holidays, day trips and family celebrations. In addition, the agency arranges several events for the children. These are well organised and enjoyed by all. One child said they enjoyed the activities and enjoyed spending time with the friends they had made. Foster carers encourage children's individual interests; children are part of football

teams and attend kick-boxing classes and Beavers. One child is currently participating in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Encouraging children's interests ensures that all children can benefit from experiences that enrich their lives.

Children have strong relationships with staff and feel connected to the agency. Children spoke positively about the agency. One child said the agency is 'the best'. Children feel listened to and their views are heard. As a result, children feel confident to be part of staff interviews and produce questions for the panel. One child said they really enjoyed being part of the interviews.

The agency has a skilled and committed support worker. They have formed trusting relationships with children and their work is tailored to the children's individual needs. This further enhances the stability of children's placements and provides the children with a further opportunity to share their wishes and views.

The children's guide is bright and colourful and tailored to different age groups. It provides children with a good overview of the agency and what to expect. However, the guide does not contain the correct information about the regulator or information about the Children's Commissioner. This limits children's opportunity to formally raise concerns if needed.

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

Foster carers have a clear understanding of children's risks and behaviours, and they are effective in keeping children safe. Children said they feel safe living with their foster families and identify their foster carer as someone they can talk to if they have any worries or concerns.

All children have individual safe care plans and risk assessments. They are detailed and provide clear information about the children's risks and vulnerabilities. They are regularly reviewed by supervising social workers and updated when new risks emerge. This supports foster carers to understand children's risks and keep children safe.

Since the last inspection, the agency has employed a therapist. They support staff and foster carers to better understand children's needs and support their emotional well-being in a more therapeutic way. Foster carers spoke positively about the support they have received from the therapist.

Children are physically held as a last resort and only when necessary to keep the child or others safe from harm. Most foster carers are trained in de-escalation techniques and how to hold children safely. Following a physical intervention, the registered manager ensures that children and foster carers are provided with the opportunity to reflect on the incident and additional support is provided by the therapeutic practitioner.

There are few allegations made to the agency. When allegations are made, the registered manager takes effective action to ensure that those against foster carer

are managed appropriately. The registered manager shares information with relevant agencies, including the local authority designated officer. This ensures that children are appropriately safeguarded when concerns are raised.

Children rarely go missing from home. When children go missing from their homes, foster carers follow plans and share information in a timely way. In addition, the agency ensures that return home interviews are carried out. This means that children are provided with the opportunity to explore why they go missing from home.

The registered manager plans for a minimum of two unannounced visits annually to each fostering household. During the visits, the children are spoken to alone, and their bedrooms are seen. In addition, supervising social workers carry out annual health and safety checks to ensure that foster carer homes remain safe.

Recruitment of foster carers, staff and panel members is strong. There is clear management oversight of recruitment, which ensures that only safe adults provide care and support to children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

There is a suitably experienced and qualified registered manager in post. They are child-focused and are committed to providing children with the best care and positive experiences. They are supported by an experienced responsible individual who shares the same vision for the agency.

There is a stable and consistent staff team. Staff are proud to work for the agency and feel valued by the management team. Supervising social workers receive practice-based supervisions, together with team meetings and training. This supports staff to further develop their practice.

The registered manager has clear oversight of the agency's strengths and areas for development. They have effective monitoring systems in place. This includes monthly monitoring reports and case file audits, which help to identify shortfalls in practice.

An independent social worker carries out assessments of potential foster carers. Assessments are thorough and analytical and provide clear recommendations about approval. The fostering service's preparation, support and training of potential foster carers are effective. This ensures that only suitable carers provide care for children.

The fostering agency has an experienced panel chair. There are a wide range of panel members with relevant skills and knowledge to make recommendations on suitability and the continued suitability of foster carers. This is supported by the agency decision-maker, who makes clear, timely and reasoned decisions.

Professionals speak warmly of the agency and describe a close and collaborative working relationship. One social worker said the care provided to the child had been 'exemplary'

Foster carers provided very positive feedback about the support they receive from the agency. One foster carer said the support they have received is second to none.

The registered manager has processes in place for exemptions, which has enabled children to be placed with their siblings. However, the registered manager has not always followed the correct procedures regarding some foster carers' terms of approval. This has resulted in children being placed with foster carers outside the usual fostering limit.

The agency provides a range of training to foster carers. However, the registered manager has not ensured that all carers have completed their mandatory training. For example, some carers have not had de-escalation training. This is a missed opportunity for foster carers to have the right skills to meet children's needs.

Overall, new foster carers complete the training support and development standards within 12 months of their initial approval. However, there have been delays for some carers in completing the standards in the required time frames. For example, in the case of one set of foster carers, this is almost 11 months out of date. The agency has provided additional support to ensure that this is completed as soon as possible.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the children's guide includes a summary of how children can find out their rights, how a child can contact their independent reviewing officer, the Children's Rights Director, or Ofsted if they wish to raise a concern with inspectors, and how to secure access to an independent advocate. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 33, paragraph 16.4)
- The registered person should ensure that foster carers are able to evidence that the training, support and development standards have been attained within 12 months of approval (or within 18 months for family and friends foster carers). For foster carers who were approved as such before April 2008, the Standards are attained by April 2011 (or by April 2012 for family and friends foster carers). Fostering households may use the same evidence workbook. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 37, paragraph 20.3)
- The registered person should ensure that training is made available to foster carers, including hard to reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', page 41, paragraph 20.8)
- The registered person should ensure that the foster carer's terms of approval allow number of children (any terms of approval must be compatible with the number of children the foster carer is caring for even if an exemption to the usual fostering limit has been granted, unless the placement is in an emergency and for less than six days). ('The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4': Fostering services, 5.46)

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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