

Ascent Fostering Agency

Ascent Fostering Agency

Suite 5, First Floor, Hillcrest House, 51 Woodcote Road, Wallington, Surrey SM6 0LT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Ascent Fostering Agency is an independent fostering provider that is a limited company. The provider states in its statement of purpose that it has a therapeutic approach to supporting children who require foster care. The agency works with children who have a range of complex care needs and offers bespoke care and support packages within a family setting.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 30 approved foster care households. The agency was providing placements for 41 children.

The registered manager has been in post since March 2019.

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: 14 to 18 March 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account	outstanding
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How well children and young people are helped and protected	outstanding
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The effectiveness of leaders and managers	outstanding
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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 March 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Influential leaders and managers of this small agency have a culture that is characterised by high aspirations to improve and transform the lives of the children.

Children benefit from living with foster carers who provide them with loving, stable and long-lasting homes. Foster carers parent the children from a trauma-informed model that is relationship focused. As a result, the children experience care that helps them to heal and to build upon their resilience to help them achieve future success.

Attuned foster carers help the children to develop trust and grow in confidence. Professional practice results in sustained improvements to the lives of the children. One young person has recently been accepted on her chosen university course. She accredited her success to her former foster carers and to the wider support of the agency staff, who continue to support her.

Foster carers recognise that the children's progress is not linear, and for some children this takes time. For example, it took one child three years before he could manage with having his photo on display. Foster carers and the supervising social workers celebrate and recognise the children's successes, no matter how big or small.

The agency places a strong focus on supporting the children to achieve academically. Children's school attendance and educational attainment are tracked and monitored effectively by a senior manager. Practical measures include providing the children with individual tuition if required and sending personalised letters and vouchers in recognition of their successes. This encourages the children to recognise their strengths and abilities.

Supervising social workers support the foster carers from the start of their fostering journey, to build lasting relationships with the children. Many children remain connected with their fostering family and the agency as young adults and beyond. Consequently, the children develop a sense of permanence and the ability to form and sustain positive relationships.

Foster carers enjoy supportive and professional relationships with the agency. They were unanimous in their praise of the emotional and practical support that they receive from the agency staff, especially of the support that they have received throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. One foster carer said, 'The agency held us, and we held the children.'

Children experience care that is responsive to their identity and culture. This starts at the initial matching conversations and is extended throughout the children's journey with their foster carers. The agency's responsive mentors provide the

children with workshops around issues as they come up, such as black history and radicalisation. These workshops provide a safe forum for the children to examine and challenge prejudice and discrimination.

Foster carers encourage the children to follow their individual interests and hobbies. The children have access to a broad range of opportunities to try new activities. A charity affiliated to the agency provides the children with opportunities in developing leadership, creative arts, drama and football. These experiences provide the children with enjoyable and life-enhancing opportunities for personal growth. Consequently, the children's self-esteem improves and they become more confident.

The agency has developed an innovative framework that ensures that children who are new to the agency are welcomed with considered and thorough planning. A pre-placement planning meeting takes place before a child joins a fostering family. At this meeting, the potential foster carers and the professional network reflect on and learn about the child's pre-care experiences and discuss together on the child's current and future needs. This careful planning is effective, as evident in the number of long-term and stable fostering households.

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

An exemplary safeguarding focus comes from the top and is central to the staff's practice. A strength of the agency is a highly developed understanding of risks for the children in and outside the home. Managers and supervising social workers are confident to take the lead in initiating network meetings with safeguarding agencies. As a result, there is good coordination of interventions and sharing of information to identify specific risks and actions to prevent harm from reoccurring.

The agency's mentors and the supervising social workers build long-term relationships with the children to help them develop an understanding of risks in the community, such as criminal exploitation, gangs and knife crime. The children learn to recognise the risks that they may face in the community and are empowered to make more conscious choices about their safety. The protective and trusted relationships that the children have with their foster carers and other trusted adults are a strong protective factor.

Outreach support and therapeutic family intervention help children's birth families to develop safer boundaries to strengthen relationships with their children. This helps to counteract the sometimes troubled relationships and provides an additional source of stability and continuity for the children, going on into adulthood.

The agency provides regular support groups, meet-ups and training. Foster carers are proactively encouraged to take care of themselves and learn to recognise the signs of when they need extra support or rest. This approach flows down to the children, who are encouraged to talk through problems or difficult feelings and seek help when they need it.

The agency panel chair and fostering panel members provide a strong safeguarding oversight and quality assurance to the agency. They provide developmental feedback about the quality of assessments. Thorough scrutiny by the panel and the agency decision-maker means that foster carers are only approved if they have the necessary skills, values and experience to provide safe and caring homes for the children.

Standards of care investigations are handled quickly and shared with relevant safeguarding agencies. Sensitive but honest challenge is provided to the foster carers, ensuring that the focus remains on the children's well-being and safety.

Strong safeguarding reporting processes, regular staff team meetings and reflective practice support learning and development. When concerns are raised or become known, supervising social workers and managers use lessons learned to further improve safeguarding practice.

The fostering service's response to allegations made against foster carers is effective and prompt. This ensures that children are safeguarded appropriately if they make an allegation. Foster carers receive good advice and support when they are subject to allegations.

Children who go missing from care experience well-coordinated responses that reduce their risk of harm. However, the records of return home interviews are not routinely shared with the agency. Furthermore, missing child profiles in the form of 'grab packs' are not always updated quickly to include all known addresses and contacts of the children. This has the potential to delay the police and safeguarding agencies in locating a child missing from care.

Risk assessments address children's individual needs for protection, and staff keep these current. Foster carers receive ongoing guidance and training in relation to creating a safe online environment for the children in their care. However, this support could be strengthened by greater consultation with the children and ensuring a pre-placement risk assessment of the children's use of social media before they join their fostering family.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Leaders and managers are unwavering in their determination to improve the children's life chances. Research-informed practice continues to develop from a strong and confident base. The innovative approaches that the agency has developed, such as the therapeutic pre-planning meeting between the foster carers and the network around the children, are worthy of dissemination to the wider social care sector.

Supervising social workers and the foster carers are provided with outstanding training opportunities. Leaders invest substantially in high-quality training and resources. This means that the staff and foster carers are well equipped to provide

the best possible support for the children. The result is an impressive record of placement stability and permanence for the majority of the children.

The leaders' and managers' focus on personal and professional development, kindness and respect permeates throughout the culture of the organisation. The agency staff have positive and collaborative relationships with external professionals and key people who are important to the children. These relationships build trust and engagement and ensure that the children get the resources and help that they need to succeed.

The 'women's hour' group is a great example of how far the agency pushes forward to uphold and develop equality and inclusive practices. This group is set up for the agency staff and the foster carers to learn about the challenges that women and girls face in society, and how as a collective they develop therapeutic responses to meet the needs of the children.

The supervising social workers' supervision meetings are child-focused and echo the ongoing reflective conversations that occur on a daily basis. This learning culture extends the proficiency of the supervising social workers and provides an additional safeguarding layer because they have a well-informed and sophisticated understanding of the children's needs.

Foster carers' supervision visits are regular and child focused. However, the foster carer's information is kept in the same document that includes information about the children. In addition, information about children's brothers and sisters is not consistently separated. This will pose difficulties for care experienced adults in accessing their records in later life.

Managers actively monitor the quality of care that the children receive. They drive continuous improvement and new learning. The registered manager knows the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. There is strong evidence of ongoing development and improvements over a sustained period to improve the outcomes for the children. Plans to develop the organisation are ambitious and support the agency's continual development.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third-party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 26.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the care and support provided to children minimise the risk that they will go missing from care and reduce the risk of harm should the child go missing. This relates to ensuring that the agency makes sure that it has up-to-date missing profiles for the children that contain known addresses and contacts of the children. This also relates to ensuring that the agency receives copies of the children's return home interviews. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 5.1)

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: SC458129

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Inspector

Anne-Marie Davies, Social Care Inspector

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