

Affinity Fostering

Affinity Fostering Services Limited

Ingatestone Hall, Hall Lane, Ingatestone, Essex CM4 9NR

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This agency is based in Essex and was registered with Ofsted in 2013. A private provider runs the agency.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 118 foster carers in 68 households. The agency is supporting 102 children, including parent and child placements, disabled children and a small number of young people in 'staying put' placements. The agency provides long-term, short-term and emergency placements. Most foster carers live in Essex, London, Kent and Lincolnshire.

Since the last inspection, the registered manager has changed. The new manager registered with Ofsted in August 2023, and she has worked at the agency since 2016.

At least 12 children contributed their views to this inspection by speaking with inspectors or sharing their views in emails.

Inspection dates: 28 July to 1 August 2025

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: 15 August 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

The agency staff have an unmistakable approach to their care of children, which places children at the heart of everything that they do. They combine therapeutic approaches with highly skilled fostering agency workers and foster carers to ensure that children receive exceptional experiences and support.

Children are enabled to build a sense of permanence and belonging with foster carers who know them extremely well. Children become an important member of carers' families. One child said, 'I just wanted to say thank you to Affinity Fostering for giving me the best foster carer ever. They make me feel safe, happy and cared for every day. I'm really lucky to be with them.'

The agency ensures that brothers and sisters stay together whenever possible. Foster carers and agency staff have helped large sibling groups, that would otherwise have been separated, to stay together. Children said this was really important to them.

Foster carers have strongly advocated to help children have their views listened to. This helped to challenge children's care plans and enabled children to stay together. One child said, 'I feel like part of the family.' Another said, 'My carer treats me like one of her sons'.

The agency staff adapt to children's changing needs, and this gives children a range of permanency options that best suit them. The agency staff provide wraparound therapeutic support at times of challenge to foster families. This ensures that children receive comprehensive care and support to help them build resilience and settle again at home. As a result, the majority of children live with their carers long term. One child said, 'I have been supported through a very tough time, which I feel like most kids wouldn't get that amount of support or care. I couldn't ask for anything better.'

Children often stay living with their foster families after they reach 18 in staying put arrangements. One young person said, 'I've been with my carers since I was 11 years old, and now at 20, I'm still living with them under 'staying put'. It's hard to put into words just how much this stability has meant to me. My time with Affinity has been incredible. I've been supported in everything I've done, and the consistency from both my carers and the team at Affinity has played a massive part in shaping who I am today.'

Children's views are highly valued. Agency staff are dedicated to gathering children's views in creative ways and acting on their views. Children's presence is seen across many regulatory functions of the agency, from foster carer recruitment to annual reviews and feedback from birth children. Children, including carers' birth children, are purposefully connected to the service at every point to ensure their views are

heard. A foster carer said, 'Our own children have been included throughout our fostering journey, both by us and Affinity, and they also feel part of the Affinity family. The team always have our children's thoughts and wishes at the forefront and they're always striving to do better by them by giving them opportunities to use their voices.' Overall, the agency has excellent mechanisms for seeking, gathering and capturing feedback, both for children and foster carers' birth children.

Children are sensitively welcomed into foster carers' homes. They receive a welcome booklet and welcome gift when they move into the home. These gifts have been handpicked by children in the agency's young voices group. These children advocated for more imaginative ways for information to be shared with children when they move in. The agency made changes and is forward thinking in how it shares information with children across different multi-media methods.

All children are in education, are making good progress and receiving the right support to meet their educational needs. Carers have gone above and beyond to support one child to maintain their school place even though they lived a significant distance from the school. This minimised any disruption to this child's education.

Foster carers and the agency staff work together to ensure that foster families have fun together. They offer children extensive new experiences to help their social skills and development. The agency provides all children and birth children with activity money each year to spend on individual activities of their choice. This has helped children learn new skills, try new things and visit new places. Agency staff arrange annual special events as well as an overnight trip to a theme park which is loved by the children. This provides children with opportunities independent of their carers each year and helps build their self-esteem. Agency staff part funded and supported one child to apply for a 12-week residential sailing course. The child gained a new qualification as well as huge personal pride. Creating opportunities like this helps children exceed expectations. The agency staff continue to build on the inclusive feel that has been created with activities for all children.

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

Leaders and managers oversee the support needs of any children and families who are experiencing any extra difficulties. These children are carefully monitored, and agency staff offer comprehensive additional support. The agency therapeutic service manager provides foster carers with additional therapeutic training, as well as individual sessions with children or the whole foster family. Managers commission external psychological support for staff and carers as needed to ensure the right support can be available at the right time for children, carers and staff.

The agency staff ensure meticulous matching. Children's individual vulnerabilities are well understood before they move in. One child said, 'My carers get me and support me in everything I do. I have these carers because of how well Affinity knew me and knew what I needed.'

Agency workers help foster carers to understand the complexity of children's life experiences. This in turn supports carers to contribute to children's life stories in meaningful ways through their carer records and life-story books. These show the progress children have made over time. One child said, 'Affinity are just amazing at what they do. I've always known how important I am to them. You're never just another child, they know your story, and they genuinely care. I'm especially grateful that I still get to maintain my relationships with [fostering agency workers]. That continuity and care doesn't stop when you turn 18, and that's what makes Affinity so special.'

Foster carers and staff understand their safeguarding responsibilities and constantly act in the best interests of children. Children rarely go missing from home or need to be physically held by foster carers. If they do, carers are proactive in responding to children's needs and follow all relevant guidance. Incidents are well managed, and there is a rapid response from the agency's out-of-hours service to support carers and children. Carer records are detailed and clear, and there are comprehensive management overviews from senior leaders to monitor any incidents. This helps managers to understand how carers act to ensure the safety and welfare of children.

Sometimes, children have needed to move in emergency situations. However, managers and staff do all they can to try to prevent this. Agency workers, and senior leaders at times of crisis, have gone above and beyond to help make sure children are moved in sensitive ways and by someone who knows them well. This helps to reassure children at times of significant change.

The agency takes all allegations against foster carers or concerns about their quality of care seriously. Following any concerns, thorough standards of care assessments are completed. These are presented to panel to provide appropriate scrutiny. There is clear multi-agency working and information-sharing with relevant professionals when there are concerns. The agency actions learning points from any reviews to ensure that children's safety is paramount. There is constant reflection on what the agency can do differently to give carers the right support to meet children's needs. The agency is committed to being a learning organisation.

Fostering recruitment checks of all agency staff are detailed and suitable. However, checks for a panel member have not always been as thorough. Agency managers considered this feedback during the inspection and immediately adjusted their recruitment process for agency panel members moving forward.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

The agency is a family-led fostering agency that holds family values and its close-knit foster care community at its core. The agency is led by a registered manager who is highly ambitious for children. She is supported by a responsible individual who is equally invested in changing children's lives. They are both highly accessible to children, carers and staff. They unapologetically have expectations and model these for staff.

Everyone living with carers or working for the agency said they truly felt cared about. Leaders and managers understand that when staff and carers are well looked after, they can offer more tailored, patient and effective care to children. This high level of support is seen throughout the day-to-day work at the agency. Foster carer and staff well-being is a priority. The commitment to and nurture of the team and carers is reflected in the resilience of carers and the longevity of staff and carers staying with the agency.

The manager is supported by skilled staff who know the carers and children exceptionally well. The agency staff are highly ambitious for the children. In many cases, agency staff, including senior leaders, go above and beyond to provide support to carers to enhance children's lives. A child's social worker said, 'The offer they have is absolutely brilliant. It is lovely to work alongside professionals who genuinely care about children.' Another child's social worker said, 'The care and support provided is second to none.'

Morale at the agency is high; staff and foster carers feel highly valued. The manager encourages staff and carers to reflect on their feelings. A variety of well-being initiatives provided by the agency as well as external therapeutic support are available to staff and carers. Carers feel valued, respected and listened to. They describe the support as 'exceptional' and 'absolutely brilliant'. One carer said, 'They want us to succeed so we can help children to succeed.'

An extensive training offer supports carers, staff and children to learn new skills. Carers receive bespoke therapeutic training courses, in addition to the agency's core training and the annual foster carer conference. Some carers and agency staff are supported to attend specialist external training courses to meet children's specific needs. Agency staff are supported with personal development and undertake additional academic study. The agency is committed to therapeutic practice and continues to develop the variety of training offered to enhance carers' skills. One foster carer said, 'The training and guidance have been excellent, and the support doesn't stop once a child is placed. They really do walk alongside you every step of the way.' The investment in staff, carers and children is exemplary.

Leaders and managers have wide-ranging quality assurance tools that they continue to develop and adapt to ensure they can meet the changing needs of the service. Leaders and managers have a comprehensive understanding of the agency's strengths and areas of development and are proactive in making changes and embedding learning. The manager uses a variety of tools to closely monitor the quality of care, and this captures children's progress over time.

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

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure the fostering service can demonstrate, including from written records, that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance, in foster carer selection, particularly in panel member recruitment. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 19.2)

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: SC469688

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