

Alliance Foster Care

Alliance Foster Care Limited 04249271

1 Maple Court, Ash Lane, Collingtree, Northampton NN4 0NB

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Alliance Foster Care is an independent fostering agency based in Northamptonshire. It is a standalone company which is part of the National Fostering Group. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging and parent and child placements. As of 27 June 2022, the agency provided placements for 87 children in 64 fostering households.

The manager has been registered since September 2021.

Inspection dates: 27 June to 1 July 2022

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account requires improvement to be good

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers requires improvement to be good

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: 15 May 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Overall experiences for children require improvement. This is due to shortfalls in keeping children safe and in management oversight of the quality of care the agency is providing. Consequently, this has impacted on some of the children's experiences.

Children living with carers supported by this agency have mixed experiences. Some children are benefiting from sustained, positive relationships with carers and their family, from stable education placements and positive relationships with their peers and siblings.

Children are also being supported to develop life skills and age-appropriate independence skills. One child is working voluntarily in their local village shop.

Some young people benefit from being able to remain with their carers in a planned way post-18. There has been good partnership working and timely consultation with local authorities to support these plans. Children's views are sought and are given weight. However, for one child, who will be 18 this year, plans are not yet agreed.

Carers are required to undertake a therapeutic parenting training programme to support them to understand children's needs and provide good parenting. It is too early to assess the impact of this training but, given the needs of the children referred to the agency, this is a positive development.

Carers also have access to advice and guidance from a consultant clinical psychologist, as do supervising social workers and practitioners. These sessions are used to discuss children's needs and behaviours and reflect on effective practice. There have been examples of this advice supporting and maintaining placements for children.

Some carers who were approved last year are very positive about the assessment and training they experienced and about the consultation that took place before matching children with them. This included planned introductory visits. The children are settled and making progress. There has been a return to panel and carers have been approved as long-term carers for the children. This means that siblings are experiencing stable placements and positive relationships.

The agency provides bridging placements for children moving from residential care to fostering. To date, there have been mixed experiences for the small number of these children and their carers. Reflective practice sessions have taken place with practitioners and professionals involved, with a view to implementing changes to support stable placements.

Children are asked their opinions on what activity days they would like and these ideas are acted on. Support workers carry out regular sessions with children to help

build their independence skills. Although some children have not always responded initially, support workers have persevered and, as a result, have managed to build good relationships with children.

The agency tracks children's educational progress. Two children are currently without a full-time education placement. The quality of recording, to evidence what managers and staff are doing to progress education placements and advocate for children, needs to be strengthened.

Generally, recording practice by staff and carers is not yet good enough. For example, files do not consistently record the reasons and circumstances as to why or how a child leaves their foster family. This is particularly important when there is an unplanned move for a child. Carers are not fully aware of what recording is expected of them and the purpose of it.

Supervising social workers do not always ensure that each child has appropriate records in place to inform multi-agency assessment of need or effective working together to progress each child's plans.

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

Overall, when foster carers have raised complaints with the agency or the local authority, these complaints have been followed up. However, there has been one complaint that has not been managed as independently as it should have been. This may impair the effectiveness of the process.

Some grievances raised by foster carers have been due to the impact of staff changes and vacant posts. When this has been an issue, the manager has worked hard to listen to carers and address their concerns.

The complaints process for children is not effective. Concerns shared by children are not consistently recognised or responded to as complaints. This means that it is more difficult for leaders to assess whether listening to children is making a difference to their outcomes and the stability of placements.

When children make allegations or disclosures, child protection procedures are not being consistently followed to keep children safe. There is one example of a child alleging that they had been physically harmed by their foster carer during an unsafe restraint. However, the agency did not inform the local authority or speak to the child about what had happened. The manager is reviewing this. One serious incident was not notified to Ofsted.

Managers are not escalating concerns effectively when it appears that the local authority is not responding to child protection concerns. As a result, some child protection concerns have not been addressed in a timely way.

There is one household where risks are known about adults, and they have been subject to risk assessments to manage those risks. However, risk assessments and safe care checks have not been revisited and reviewed to ensure the well-being and safety of children. In addition, support person risk assessments are not consistently being completed in a way that is timely. These are mechanisms that are designed to keep children safe. The manager responded to these matters during the inspection.

Supervising social workers are not consistently recording discussions with children during visits to carers about the quality of care they are receiving. Although the agency uses the 'youth voice' tool to capture children's feedback, the agency recognises that they need to do more to evidence identifying and listening to children's views. Where children are placed for whom English is not their first language, the agency has not demonstrated that there are resources in place to support supervising social workers to gather children's views about the care that is being provided to them.

A sample of recruitment records identified that a member of staff had a standard Disclosure and Barring Service check rather than an enhanced one. This risk was mitigated by this being the most recent employee, undertaking induction to the agency and previously having been subject to an enhanced check with a local authority. This is being addressed as a priority and the employee is subject to a risk assessment. The manager is reviewing how this has happened. This raises a concern about oversight of safe recruitment practice.

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

There has been a sustained period of change leading up to this inspection. The current manager has been in post since September 2021. Before this, there were three changes of manager and two temporary managers. When the manager joined the service, the staff team had three supervising social worker vacancies out of a team of six. This means that the team manager and advanced practitioner were supporting carers and overseeing placements. The registered manager was also supporting staff and carers.

As a result, there has been some impact on the effectiveness of the review of quality of care and compliance with safeguarding procedures, records and recording.

All vacancies have now been recruited to, but this has happened relatively recently. This recruitment means that managers and senior staff will be able to focus on the development of staff and carers, and compliance with regulations, policy and procedures.

There have also been changes to the fostering panel. There have been changes of panel chair, vice chair and a small number of panel members. This has resulted in a reduced number of panel members who have completed safe recruitment checks and are available to panel.

There has been one example where the partner of a foster carer was allowed to live as a permanent member of the fostering household without there having been an updated fostering assessment. Although the agency had completed some safety checks to mitigate risk, this is not safe practice. Before these checks took place, this person had been living as part of the fostering household for a number of years. There was poor advice to the previous manager and team about the need for an assessment and return to panel. The manager is reviewing this information.

The agency decision-maker has training planned with the panel regarding safeguarding and safe panel processes.

Managers recognise the need to undertake a lessons learned exercise and consider whether some of the safeguarding shortfalls identified in this inspection need to be reviewed by panel. Any information about good practice and learning arising from this should be shared across the service and with carers.

There has been a small core team of stable staff who have prioritised ensuring children have support, including good use of support workers visiting children to gather their views.

There are detailed carer assessments undertaken by a regional assessment team. A recent development within the team is the team manager having oversight of assessments for this agency, alongside the regional assessment manager. There is also a plan for the team to undertake more assessments, given it now has capacity to do so. There is a recognition that prospective carers in assessment would benefit from knowing more about the children referred to this agency and the staff, and the support they will receive from the agency. This is with a view to improving matching of children with carers' skills and experiences and carer retention.

Leading up to this inspection, there have been an increased number of unplanned endings for children. Managers are assessing the reasons behind this but there has been a period of change within the service and some impact to quality assurance as a result of capacity in the management team.

Managers have not escalated challenge to placing local authorities about incidents when there has been poor support for children, essential records being missing and gaps in visiting children in a timely or sufficiently robust way. This means that some children have experienced delays in planning and decisions about their care.

There is a range of training available for foster carers, however this is primarily online. Some foster carers have said that they would like more face-to-face training. The agency has listened to carers and is in the process of increasing the number of face-to-face courses available. Training plans for foster carers are not consistently up to date. There is a plan to review training documents in line with annual review processes.

Foster carers receive regular supervision. Although most foster carers are satisfied with the support being provided, not all foster carers felt this way. Due to staff

turnover, not all foster carers have experienced the same stability in supervising social worker. The manager recognises this and has worked hard to recruit a full staff team and reassure foster carers that the agency is listening to them.

Foster carers have access to regular support groups, foster carer forums and activity days. The agency rewards foster carers with vouchers, celebrating their commitment to children.

Staff have regular team meetings and supervisions. Team morale is described as good.

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 person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed with foster carers is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (a))</p>	30 August 2022
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect. The procedure must provide in particular for—</p> <p>written records to be kept of any allegation of abuse or neglect, and of the action taken in response,</p> <p>consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (1)(b) (3)(d)(e))</p>	30 August 2022
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must establish a written procedure for considering complaints made by or on behalf of children placed by the agency, and by foster parents approved by the agency.</p> <p>The procedure must, in particular, provide—</p> <p>for an opportunity for informal resolution of the complaint at an early stage,</p> <p>that no person who is the subject of a complaint takes part in its consideration other than, if the registered person considers it appropriate, at the informal resolution stage only,</p> <p>for dealing with complaints about the registered person.</p> <p>The registered person must ensure that a written record is made of any complaint or representation, the action taken in response to it, and the outcome of the investigation.</p>	30 August 2022

<p>The registered person must ensure that children are enabled to make a complaint or representation. (Regulation 18 (1) (2)(a)(b)(c) (4) (5)(a))</p>	
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Recommendation

- The fostering service can demonstrate that it consistently follows good recruitment practice and all applicable current statutory requirements and guidance in staff recruitment. All personnel responsible for recruitment and selection of staff should be trained in and understand and operate this good practice. ('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: SC033794

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Responsible individual: Anna Tchaikovsky

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Inspectors

Cathey Moriarty, Social Care Inspector
Andi Lilley-Tams, Social Care Inspector

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