

# 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 stand-alone company which is part of the National Fostering Agency group. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements, including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging and parent and child placements. The agency provided placements for 128 children in 83 fostering households as of 31 March 2017. It received 14 applications to be approved as a fostering household during the year April 2016 to March 2017.

**Inspection dates:** 15 to 19 May 2017

**Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account** **outstanding**

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

The effectiveness of leaders and managers **outstanding**

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:** 23 May 2014

**Overall judgement at last inspection:** outstanding

**Enforcement action since last inspection**

None

## Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- From their starting points, children and young people make exceptional progress in all areas of their lives.
- Foster carers demonstrate an excellent understanding of the needs of those children and young people placed with them. They receive excellent support from agency staff and a wide range of training. They feel very much part of a team.
- The registered manager of this agency is inspirational and passionate about improving the experiences and outcomes for all children and young people placed. She leads by example and inspires her staff and carers to provide the highest level of care and support possible.
- Research informs practice in this agency to a very high level. This inspection found some extremely innovative and creative practice being used to support carers and improve services to children and young people.
- Children and young people enjoy very stable and secure placements. Permanency is actively promoted by the agency. Children and young people feel very much a part of the fostering family and develop a strong sense of belonging over time.
- Children and young people have experiences during their placements that they might not otherwise have had. Such experiences include the chance to travel abroad, join clubs and take part in new activities. This increases their self-esteem and feeling of being valued within their foster family and wider society.
- A high value is placed on education and health needs. Children and young people receive excellent emotional and practical support from carers and agency staff. This leads to them engaging well in education and having their health needs very well met.
- The recruitment and assessment of both agency staff and carers is extremely robust and thorough. The agency's fostering panel consists of members and a panel chair with a wealth of skills and experience. They provide a vital level of scrutiny and challenge. This leads to an agency with highly competent and skilled carers, motivated to provide the best possible standard of care to children and young people.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- For the agency to ensure that minutes from all fostering panels include full and clear details of the issues, discussions and recommendations made. A very small number of minutes considered during this inspection did not contain sufficiently detailed information.

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

### **Recommendations**

- Ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reason for its recommendation. (Fostering Services: national minimum standards, paragraph 14.7, page 30)

## Inspection judgements

### **Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding**

This agency provides excellent care and support to all children and young people placed. It is striking to hear from carers of their detailed understanding of the needs of those children living with them and how they support children to make improvements in all areas of their lives. A key strength of this agency is in how well it succeeds in providing permanent placements for children and young people, particularly in relation to sibling groups.

Carers were able to fully convey the journey of the child and their contribution to that journey during this inspection. Examples include where children placed did not previously engage in education. Certificates and awards reflect how children are making significant progress in their educational placements. This is not just in relation to their academic achievements, but to their emotional stability and well-being. For some children and young people, such progress really is significant. For them to be able to concentrate and engage in educational activities is a very significant achievement.

There is an abundance of evidence of how well carers support educational attendance and performance within this agency. Carers place great value on education and work closely with education providers to ensure that children make progress. The agency also provides support for those children who may be temporarily excluded from, or those not attending, formal education. This involves children and young people being able to come to the agency's office and undertake education focused work with agency staff. This not only supports the child, but also supports the foster carer and promotes the value of education.

Children and young people receive consistent care and support. Carers rarely use respite carers to support them. They prefer to fully include children and young people in all aspects of the foster family and rely on family, friends and informal arrangements with other approved carers from this agency for support. This reflects an agency and carers who place the needs of children at the centre of all they do.

There have been no complaints from children or young people to this agency for a considerable period of time. Those spoken with during this inspection knew of their right to complain and felt confident in being able to do so. It is also commendable that a group of young people recently worked with agency staff and managers to review and update information provided to children and young people at the start of their placements. This further reflects an agency committed to listening to children and in including them fully. At the start of a placement a support worker from the agency visits children and young people. This is in order to go through the welcome guide with them. This provides a very personal and sensitive service to children and young people at a time of particular stress.

Children and young people have excellent social and recreational opportunities

provided to them by this agency. They experience new things, feel very much part of their local community and grow in confidence and self-esteem. Some examples of what they do include foreign holidays, club memberships, paid part-time employment, learning to drive and school trips. For some children and young people, they have not previously had such opportunities and they clearly flourish as a result.

Children and young people also receive excellent physical and emotional health support from carers and staff in this agency. Staff and carers have a commendable understanding of their needs and ensure that all needs are met. The agency employs the services of an independent psychotherapist who supports carers with training, as well as providing clinical support to agency staff. This further supports carers in their ability to identify and meet the health needs of children and young people. Carers have a detailed understanding of the impact of trauma and attachment issues for children and use the skills gained from their training to support them.

Some children placed with carers in this agency have very complex health needs. It is apparent that carers have excellent skills in supporting children with such needs. Carers work very closely with health professionals to ensure that children receive the support and services that they require. A recurring theme during this inspection was how strongly carers advocate for children and young people. They place the needs of children at the centre of all they do. They take their role as a corporate parent extremely seriously and ensure that health issues are met consistently. They receive training of a very high calibre, which further enhances their skills.

Agency staff and carers fully support children and young people to see and keep in contact with family members and significant others, in line with agreed plans. Children and young people report feeling very much part of their fostering families and being able to see friends and family as well. One young person spoken with during this inspection shared their excitement at going abroad soon on holiday as part of a large group with the foster carer and their family. It was apparent how significant this was for the young person and how much it was assisting in increasing their sense of being valued and belonging.

This agency works very closely with children and young people to ensure that they contribute to all aspects of their care. This clearly works well. Those young people spoken with during this inspection felt very much part of not only their foster family, but also the agency. Young people assist the agency in interviewing staff and have recently provided their views on changes to the children's guides.

Several children and young people have remained with their carers under permanency plans or staying put arrangements. This reflects how attached they become to their carers and the excellent progress that they make. Placing authorities clearly feel that carers from this agency provide children and young people with an exceptionally safe and positive experience, leading to them agreeing such plans.

All of those carers spoken with during this inspection stated how thorough the assessment process was. They felt it was challenging and rigorous, with a strong

focus on safeguarding. Carers consistently refer to feeling part of a team around the child. They value the support provided by agency staff and managers. They act as very strong and positive advocates for those children placed with them. They demonstrate real tenacity in challenging placing authorities to provide better services.

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

Children feel protected from harm. They say that their carers keep them safe. Carers work very closely and proactively with agency staff and placing authorities to secure information about children and young people. This informs their risk assessments and plans. Managers closely monitor any actual or potential concerns and take action to reduce or eliminate such risks.

Those children and young people spoken with during this inspection all reported feeling safe and said that they are able to speak about any concerns or issues with their carers. One young person, when asked about what the placement meant to them, stated, 'It provides me with comfort and security.' Carers demonstrate a commendable level of understanding of the complex needs of the children living with them. They respond to situations with great skill and sensitivity.

The agency also employs support workers. They undertake direct work with children and young people on such areas as internet safety, child sexual exploitation and independence planning. They use a wide range of resources and materials to support children and young people with any identified areas of concern or need. This supports and educates those children and young people. It also provides additional support to carers, leading to increased placement stability.

Carers understand the behaviours that children and young people may display and respond in a sensitive manner to them. As a result of the excellent training provided, carers display a very detailed understanding of attachment and trauma issues. They transfer their learning into practice, supported fully by agency staff. They adapt the care and support that they provide to reflect the changing needs of those children placed with them.

Incidents of children or young people going missing from their foster placements are very few. Detailed and regularly reviewed risk assessments enable carers to respond to any such situations with confidence and competence. Managers and staff follow procedures with carers to ensure the safe and swift return of any missing child or young person. Carers and agency staff know the children and young people placed with them so well, that they can pre-empt situations and effectively use de-escalation techniques. Very close and proactive partnership working, including with birth family members, leads to secure and safe placements.

The recruitment and selection procedures in this agency are excellent. From the point of applications coming in, either for agency staff or potential carers, extremely rigorous and effective systems prevent unsuitable staff or carers from being recruited or having the opportunity to harm children or place them at risk. Human

resources colleagues within the agency provide high levels of scrutiny and challenge at all stages of the recruitment process.

Agency staff and carers demonstrate a detailed understanding of safeguarding and child protection matters. Bespoke training is provided to educate carers on allegations. Carers display an excellent knowledge of their responsibilities, the role of the designated officer and procedures.

Where carers have been subject to allegations, agency staff and managers have diligently followed relevant policies and procedures. Support has been provided to carers throughout the process and the safety and protection of children given full consideration. The manager has referred relevant cases back to the fostering panel for consideration of approval and registration. Outcome letters have been sent to relevant carers. It is also to the credit of the manager that plans are in place to undertake research this year with a local university. This is in relation to the impact of unsubstantiated allegations on carers, children and young people. The manager also plans to deliver training to designated officers and local authority social workers around the impact that the allegations investigation process has on carers and placed children. This is highly innovative practice for a fostering agency to be considering.

The recruitment of foster carers places a strong emphasis on child protection and safeguarding matters. The registered manager has also recently agreed that an additional day's training will be provided to prospective carers as part of their 'Skills To Foster' course. The training will include the independently employed psychotherapist presenting training on attachment and trauma. This ensures that carers feel well-equipped and able to respond to the emotional needs of those children placed with them.

### **The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding**

The registered manager of this agency is inspirational, exceptionally skilled and committed to her role. Agency staff and carers consistently praise her style of leadership and management. She leads by example and states, 'My view is that if I support my managers well, they support agency staff well, who in turn support our carers well, who then support the children well.' Such an ethos is clearly working, as evidenced during this inspection from discussions with all staff, carers, children and young people.

Carers refer to being part of a 'family' around the child, feeling highly valued and professional. Agency staff speak with passion and dedication about their roles and the successes of the children and young people placed with their carers. A number of carers stated their reason for choosing to foster with this agency as being down to the child-centred attitude of staff and managers.

The registered manager is supported by two team managers, who display equal passion and ambition for their carers, staff, children and young people. They have high expectations of their staff and carers, which leads to strong progress being made by children and young people.

The agency has a very detailed business plan, setting realistic but ambitious targets. Managers monitor and track all aspects of the care and support provided to children and young people. They produce detailed reports and demonstrate a detailed insight into what is working well and what could be improved. This is particularly evident in relation to their eagerness to learn from allegations made about carers.

Managers display a commendable knowledge and insight into their carers' abilities and the needs of the children and young people placed with them. There is a robust referral and placement matching process in place. It is very apparent that a strong emphasis is placed on the matching of children's needs in this agency. All carers and staff spoken with were very clear that no pressure is placed on them to make a placement if either staff or carers do not feel the match is right. Such consideration and attention to detail has led to excellent placement stability.

The manager considers all complaints promptly and thoroughly. It is of particular note how effectively staff have supported children and young people when they have experienced a change of social worker or independent reviewing officer. Managers raise concerns with authorities, but also ensure that agency staff and carers provide the necessary support in the interim. This reflects an agency manager and staff group that go above and beyond their roles.

One recommendation was made as a result of the last inspection. Changes have been made to the fostering panel minutes. They now clearly reflect the decision-making process of the agency decision maker, including all documentation taken into consideration and the reason for the decision made in each case. There have been no referrals made to the Independent Review Mechanism.

Managers are strong advocates for children and young people. They regularly challenge placing authorities to ensure that services and support are in place. There is a commendable commitment to ensuring that all children and young people receive the care and support that they need. This has recently involved a reciprocal arrangement being made with a local team that provides 'Theraplay' services in the local area. In exchange for the free use of office space at the agency for the 'Theraplay' team, agency staff are undertaking training in 'Theraplay' themselves. This reflects the excellent partnership working by this agency and its staff. It also reflects the commitment to continually improving the skills of staff.

A key strength of this agency is the extensive and highly relevant training provided to staff and carers. E-learning and face-to-face courses equip carers with a wide range of skills and knowledge. As one professional stated, 'The carers in this agency are very therapeutically trained and skilled. If I know that a child I am working with is placed with this agency, I am very happy.' A number of carers are currently studying for a level 3 diploma. This further enhances the carer's competencies and makes them feel valued and skilled.

Training is available and accessed by all agency staff, carers and panel members. Foster carers really value the fact that agency staff and fostering panel members sit in on the same training. They appreciate this and that learning is shared and reflects

an agency keen to develop all of its staff together.

Agency staff and carers receive regular and valuable supervision. The needs of children and young people are central to all formal supervision and appraisal meetings. Carers and staff report gaining a lot from supervision, with staff also receiving clinical support from the independent psychotherapist. Annual reviews of foster carers are undertaken by an independent reviewing officer. Their feedback during this inspection was very positive. They have extensive experience of fostering and being a member of several fostering panels for other agencies. They rate this agency highly and feel it assesses and approves very high calibre carers. The registered manager has also introduced a system to seek feedback from a wide range of professionals to inform the annual review process. This reflects the learning ethos of this agency and its commitment to continual improvement.

The fostering panel central list reflects a membership of wide expertise. The panel is comprised of people with qualifications and experience in nursing and education. It also includes former children looked after, foster carers, police officers and social workers. It promotes safe, secure and stable placements through its work with the agency. The agency decision-maker and panel chair are very experienced and have been involved with the fostering panel of this agency for many years.

A very small number of panel minutes would benefit from having more detail recorded in them. Three sets of minutes in relation to allegations did not fully reflect the panel discussions or processes for reaching their recommendations. Case file records for those carers did contain full information, which had been sent to panel members in advance of the relevant meeting for consideration. This is a minor shortfall and does not detract from the very robust and detailed consideration by panel members of cases brought before it, or of the agency decision-maker's consideration and decisions.

## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people. Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference made to the lives of children and young people. They watched how professional staff work with children and young people and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care provided. Wherever possible, they talked to children and young people and their families. In addition, the inspectors have tried to understand what the independent fostering agency knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the children and young people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

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

**Registered provider:** Alliance Foster Care Limited 04249271

**Registered provider address:** Frays Court, 71 Cowley Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 2AE

**Responsible individual:** Iain Anderson

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## **Inspector(s)**

Tracy Murty: social care inspector



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