

Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

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Chambers Business Centre, Chapel Road, Oldham OL8 4QQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This privately owned independent fostering agency was registered in January 2007. The agency provides the following types of foster placements:

- emergency
- short term
- long term
- respite
- parent and child.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 51 approved fostering households. These families were caring for 59 children.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since July 2020.

This inspection involved both on-site and off-site inspection activity. Foster carers and children were enabled to take part by video calls.

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: 10 to 14 January 2022

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

The independent fostering agency provides effective services that meet the requirements for good.

Date of last inspection: 26 February 2018

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Overall, children experience care that is thoughtful and sensitive to their needs. Children spoken to feel settled with their foster carers and part of their foster families' lives.

Almost half of all the children are in long-term placements. One independent reviewing officer commented of a child: 'I've been working with him a long time and watched him grow up into a lovely young man. The foster carers have kept him on track, and he is a credit to them.'

Children are supported to sustain positive family identities. Most children placed benefit from being able to live with a brother or sister. In addition, in line with their plans, children are helped to keep in touch with others who are important to them.

As children become young adults, and in line with their wishes, some have remained with their foster families under 'staying put' arrangements. This offers them the support, guidance and stability they need until they are ready for independence.

Overall, arrangements for children to move into foster placements benefit from suitable planning and information-gathering. However, on one occasion, the foster carers did not benefit from written plans and information when children were placed. Although meetings with the local authority had taken place prior to their move, this was not accompanied with essential documentation. A requirement is made in relation to this.

Most placements are stable and when children do move on, placements are in line with their plans. For example, children return to live with their birth family or 'connected people'.

To reduce the number of unplanned moves, the agency has identified and acted upon areas for improvement. For example, it has established a 'children who foster' group that is supported by therapeutic workers. One child who attended stated that their experience of this group was 'brilliant'.

During times of national restrictions, the agency engaged with children and foster carers using both virtual contact and face-to-face visits. When possible, the agency re-established activities. They have continued to plan ahead, offering a wide and frequent range of fun things to do.

Children benefit from foster carers who understand the impact of previous life experiences. The agency is committed to improving their services to children through strengthening their foster carers' skills base. For example, all staff and foster carers have completed introduction training in therapeutic care. The agency plans to develop this further and provide additional accredited courses.

Foster carers have access to good support networks and mechanisms for feeding back to the agency. Recent initiatives include offering therapeutically underpinned art classes for children fostered and foster carers' birth children. Foster carers can also attend a support group for those who care for children with complex needs.

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

Children say they feel safe and that they trust their foster carers. The sense of safety that children experience underpins the progress they make in their lives.

Incidents of children going missing from home are responded to appropriately by the agency and foster carers. Risk assessment plans are updated and reflect the known risks that children may face.

Physical interventions are infrequent and used to keep children and others safe. However, following one incident, recordings by foster carers were unclear as to their actions towards the child. This was not appropriately reviewed by managers and an opportunity to prevent recurrence was missed by the supervising social worker. Foster carers were not spoken to following the incident nor was the incident addressed later in supervision. A recommendation is made to address this.

Foster carers benefit from a wide range of training that supports their safe care of children and increases their understanding and knowledge base. The agency strives to ensure that training remains engaging and interesting. For example, recent training on internet use took an approach that explored creating a positive profile or online presence.

Children are regularly seen by supervising social workers and unannounced visits to carers take place at appropriate intervals. Good formal and informal support enables foster carers to continue to offer care in challenging circumstances and maintain placements into the longer term.

Foster carers overwhelmingly reported to inspectors that they felt fully supported by their supervising social workers. Supervising social workers in turn felt that their caseloads enabled them to provide support to foster carers and children on a needs-led basis.

Managers have responded appropriately to allegations made by children and have worked well with other agencies. However, on one occasion, managers did not notify Ofsted with regard to an allegation that had been made and police attending the foster carer's home. A requirement is made to address this.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Managers are ambitious for the agency to develop and improve. For example, managers are intending to provide enhanced training to foster carers to embed the therapeutic approach. Ancillary services such as the 'healing hearts' therapeutic

service and additional foster carer support groups complement and support this approach.

Staff and foster carers feel fully supported by the agency. Good levels of supervision and training provide opportunities for staff and foster carers to reflect on their roles and improve the care offered to children. In addition to managerial supervision, supervising social workers can also access bi-monthly group clinical supervision.

Staff were enthusiastic about their role and morale among staff was high. They were knowledgeable about the children placed and the strengths and areas for development of the foster carers. They felt listened to and considered that managers promoted an environment of openness and learning.

Professionals spoke highly of the agency and the foster carers. Feedback from commissioners was positive and said the agency worked well with the local authority to identify appropriate placements for children.

There is an established children's group. This group assists with rewriting information given to children and has recently been involved in the interview process for staff and foster carers. Managers value the input of children.

The fostering panel is established and effective. The panel chair is knowledgeable and as a panel they scrutinise all information presented to provide effective and robust recommendations. Where shortfalls are identified, there is a clear mechanism in place to report this to the agency. Likewise, the agency decision-maker is also effective in their role.

Overall, there are suitable monitoring systems in place for managers to have oversight of the service. However, although local authorities are approached for documentation, there remain several out-of-date or missing plans.

Since the last inspection, foster carers' assessments have been completed by a central team. This provides consistency and enables the agency's supervising social workers to focus their time on providing timely support to foster carers and children.

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

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions that the registered person must take to meet the Care Standards Act 2000, Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards. The registered person must comply within the given timescales.

Requirement	Due date
The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care, for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6(3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))	30 April 2022
If any of the events listed in column 1 of the table in Schedule 7 takes place in relation to a fostering agency, the registered person must without delay notify the persons or bodies indicated in respect of the event in column 2 of the table. (Regulation 36 (1)) This particularly relates to notification being made to HMCI.	30 April 2022

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that they regularly monitor all records kept by the service to ensure compliance with the service's policies, to identify any concerns about specific incidents and to identify patterns and trends. Immediate action should be taken to address any issues raised by this monitoring. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 25.1)

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: SC069335

Registered provider: Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

Registered provider address: Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: Pamela Larsen

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Inspectors

Pauline Yates, Social Care Inspector

Sarah Oldham, Social Care Inspector

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