

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

Affinity was registered in 2013. It is a small, independent agency, and the office is based in Essex. Growth has been incremental and careful. Foster carers are located in Essex, London and Kent.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 46 households with 68 children, five parent and child placements and two young people staying put placements. The agency provides long-term, short-term and emergency placements. The agency does offer some placements for children with disabilities and unaccompanied asylum seekers. The directors who began the agency remain at the helm of the service.

Inspection dates: 10 to 13 July 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	good

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: 11 August 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

- This is a bespoke agency. The attention to detail supports a culture of success for the children placed with the foster carers.
- Committed, highly supported foster carers provide excellent care.
- The foster carers, children and the staff say that there is a family feel throughout the agency.
- All of the staff hold the foster carers in high regard. They respect the work that the carers do with the children, yet are able to professionally, competently and respectfully make a challenge when issues arise.
- Assessments of the foster carers and their circumstances are robust, in-depth, balanced and thoroughly scrutinised.
- The foster panel is made up of individuals from a range of different professional backgrounds. The panel focus is firmly on children. Collectively, the panel members have an excellent understanding of the issues faced by children looked after.
- The directors who began the service remain central to the day-to-day operations and the strategic, incremental growth of the service. Through their actions, they demonstrate a tremendous commitment to the children, their foster carers and the staff.
- Placement matching is careful, considered and completed in partnership with the foster carers and any other children in placement.
- Very experienced, skilled and knowledgeable supervising social workers provide consistent, reliable and excellent outcome-focused support to the foster carers.
- Practice is innovative and child-centred. The children are at the heart of all decision-making.
- Skilled participation workers offer an additional layer of practical support for the foster carers and the children in placement.
- An imaginative approach to training ensures that the foster carers and staff have the opportunity to learn together.
- The adults in the agency consistently work together to go above and beyond to support the children in their care.
- Children in staying put placements have the opportunity to be involved in work apprenticeships with this agency.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

This bespoke and unique agency is moving into its fourth year of operation. Growth has been incremental and considered. There has been a recent increase in the number of parent and child placements delivered. One parent said, 'I have never felt so welcome anywhere in my life.'

Around one third of current placements are long-term or permanent. Approximately 65% of the foster carers have previously been carers for other agencies. It is word of mouth about the quality of the staff that has brought the carers and others to this service. Many of the foster carers are experienced, and they bring a wealth of knowledge and understanding to their role.

The resilient and highly skilled foster carers say that the family feel of the organisation and the opportunity for straightforward access to the directors, help them to offer the consistent levels of support to the children. One carer said, 'We all have the mobile telephone numbers for both of the directors in our phones, and we all know that we can ring them at any time and that we will be listened to.' The carers are equally valued by a professional staff team. One supervising social worker said, 'Our foster carers are amazing. What they do with the children is wonderful. We are very proud of them.'

The children placed in this service are valued and respected, and because of this, they flourish. The vast majority of children have warm, nurturing and respectful relationships with their foster carers and the staff from the agency. Unplanned placement endings are rare. When a child leaves in an unplanned way, the staff and the carers feel a sense of failure. One sibling said of her foster carer, 'When her [child] placement ended, I could see that our carer had done everything that she could. She was very upset about having to let go.' During a group discussion with foster carers, they spoke of the culture of commitment and determination across the agency, which is about placing the individual child at the heart of decision-making. One carer said, 'I cannot speak highly enough of my supervising social worker who goes above and beyond. She also supports me above and beyond what is expected of her.' Carers say that because of this consistent level of support from the whole team, from the office staff to the directors, they too are able to persevere and support the children through challenging times. One carer said, 'When things are difficult we don't like to give up.'

Placements are carefully matched. The existing children in placement are involved in the discussion around any new placements to be made. The registered manager said, 'We place children when we are as sure as we can be that the placement is the right match. We do not want to set anyone up to fail.'

The agency has high expectations of its carers, who go above and beyond to focus on the individual needs of the children who become part of the fabric of their

extended families. The carers work tirelessly to do all that they can to support and advocate for the children in their care. Efficiently using information from the placement planning meeting, the foster carers and the supervising social workers make it a priority to develop excellent working relationships with other agencies. This information helps them to anticipate and forecast the children's health, social and emotional needs. The result is that all of the children access a range of opportunities and this helps to maximise their potential to grow and develop. Examples of feedback from different children are:

- 'Being part of Affinity is like having a second chance at life.'
- 'My life has been turned around.'
- 'If you had met me a few years ago you would see a different person who could not behave and did not accept authority.'
- 'The support that my foster carer has given me is amazing. My life is completely different. I have a busy life, and I am involved in a lot of sport, and I have completed my Duke of Edinburgh.'
- 'My foster carers are the kindest and most supportive people. They give me confidence.'

Over 95% of the children who are of school age are in education. A number of these children have previously missed out or been out of education for some time, in some cases years. For those children, being in education is a significant achievement. The children make meaningful progress in their ability to read, write and take an active part in school life. Some of the older children sit GCSEs and achieve good results. Many of the children develop and fulfil their aspirations, such as learning to drive and going to college. One child said, 'Before I came to live with this carer I was not interested in school or education. Now because of the support that I receive and how settled I feel I have been able to get back into school and I feel great about it. I am thinking about my future and what job I want to have.' For those children have not enrolled in school, the service advocates with the placing local authority and virtual schools to make sure that some interim provision is identified, such as home tutoring. The very small number of older children who are without education or employment receive ongoing support from their carers. One placing social worker said, 'Our child has lost interest. But his carers are fantastic. They are really good at coming up with new ideas to support him to find employment.' This support demonstrates that the children are provided with the opportunity to fulfil their full potential.

The children quickly improve their physical appearance and general well-being. The foster carers ensure that the children have everything that they need to meet their individual and cultural needs. Where children have contact with their birth families, the carers go above and beyond to ensure that the children benefit directly from the time with their birth families. For example, one carer invited the children's mother into the foster home to cook culturally traditional dishes for her children. Carers are willing to do whatever is necessary to ensure that children maintain their identity.

The content of the colourful and informative children's guide has been amended following feedback from the children. The information gives the children advice

about what they can expect from the agency. It provides additional information and guidance on internet safety, money management and personal goal setting. Some of the children from this agency spoke about feeling safe, valued and listened to by their foster carers and the staff. One child said, 'We know that Affinity really do listen to us because we see it.'

The children have vibrant, colourful lives and are kept busy. The foster carers work shoulder-to-shoulder with the staff to motivate those children who may need more support. Those children receive help, support and encouragement to take part in a broad range of exciting social activities, interests and leisure pursuits, such as music lessons and sporting events. The agency organises events to maximise the children's connection with the service, including competitions and outdoor activities. The newsletter enables the children's achievements to be widely acknowledged and celebrated. An annual holiday for the children, accompanied by the staff, ensures that the bond with the agency endures. Birthdays are celebrated with a voucher. This personal touch raises children's self-esteem and creates a culture of success.

The agency works with the children to understand their views about their care plan. The supervising social workers take steps to advocate on the children's behalf to ensure that any services required from other agencies are sought. The social workers are proactive to identify and to ensure that the right resources from the right services are in place to meet any additional physical, mental or emotional well-being need. Focused and efficient placement planning meetings with the local authority ensure that the carers have the appropriate delegated authority. Contact plans are clear and are followed by the carers. This helps to provide the children with continuity and helps them to feel safe, valued and hopeful.

Recognising the importance of education and the value of employment, this agency goes above and beyond to provide opportunities for children. For example, one child who is staying put has begun a formal apprenticeship in the agency. This carefully and sensitively managed process provides concrete and meaningful solutions for children. This controlled, creative and progressive arrangement provides a positive role model for other children who are making the transition from care to independence.

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

Partnership working with other organisations ensures that custom and practice across the organisation remains current and based on the outcomes of research. This sets the tone for a culture where positive regard, the growth of children's self-esteem and confidence are integral and embedded throughout all aspects of service delivery.

The small group of supervising social workers in this service are attuned, highly skilled and experienced professionals. They keep up to date with key developments in fostering through their affiliation with external organisations. Their confidence, competence and knowledge help them to identify issues quickly and to embed the service vision. One of the team said, 'Our approach is to promote a culture of high

praise, low criticism.' The children represented in this inspection were able to reflect this. For example, one child described her foster carers' approach to setting boundaries and effecting positive, meaningful change. She said, 'When I lived at home, and I stayed out I would be shouted at when I came home, and that was not good for me. When I came to live with these foster carers at first, I would still stay out and then I began to notice that every time I came back no matter what time, my carer would never shout at me or make me feel bad ever. She would just sit down with me and explain what she had been doing to look for me when I was gone and the reasons why what I was doing could be unsafe. So after a while, I just stopped going.' The result is that for a number of the children the frequency and intensity of going missing and risk-taking behaviours begins to reduce over time. This approach helps to empower the children to make good decisions about their personal safety and helps them to take responsibility for their behaviour.

When children continue to place themselves at significant risk, the agency, in partnership with the foster carers, evaluates the impact of the behaviours for the child and any other children living in the home. In some situations, where necessary the managers will make the difficult decision to end the placement. The registered manager said, 'When we know that we have tried everything and that as an agency we can no longer keep a child safe then we will end the placement.' There is a balanced and measured approach to behaviour and risk management. One placing social worker said, 'The foster carer is very supportive and understanding of our young person's emotional and behavioural needs.'

There is a highly effective out-of-hours service. Foster carers confidently know that when they contact the service at any time in the night or the day, that they will receive the help, support and guidance that they need from a member of the team who has knowledge about their and the child's circumstances. This means that risky behaviours and challenging situations can be dealt with efficiently and professionally.

Many foster carers understand how to apply the key messages from research into the impact of disrupted attachments. The consistency of the foster carers' professional working relationships with their allocated supervising social worker and high-quality supervision in their own homes on a monthly basis makes this possible. The supervising social workers' caseloads are low, and this gives them ample time to develop a meaningful relationship with all household members. The expectation is that in households where there are two carers, both of the carers attend supervision every three months. Carers receive a copy of the notes from the supervision meetings detailing actions to ensure the continued focus on keeping children safe and feeling secure. One carer said, 'Without the support of my supervisor there would have been times when I could not have continued.' One supervising social worker said, 'Wherever I am or whatever I am doing, I will just stop to take that phone call and make the time to listen for however long it takes.'

The pre-approval process is carefully overseen by the managers. It is thorough and robust. Experienced foster carers are integral to pre-approval training because they come to talk to prospective carers about what to expect from being foster carers. This helps carers to have realistic expectations of their role. One carer in assessment said, 'I have been really surprised at how thorough they are being. I am also

surprised at how much I have found that I have spoken about my own experiences.'

The central list of panel members shows a rich range of experience from other disciplines, including health and education. The panel chair is very experienced in social care and in fostering. She offers significant professional insight and consistency, and is mindful to ensure that all members of the panel have the opportunity to raise any queries or questions of the assessment presented. This support allows for effective information exchange and for all members to raise their key questions and have any concerns explored. The agency decision maker said, 'A robust process is followed by the foster panel.'

Panel minutes with a clear rationale for recommendation helps the agency decision maker to reach balanced decisions. An open and transparent approach between the agency and the panel leaves room to acknowledge where lessons can be learned and further improvements made to strengthen the existing vigorous process. The panel is reflective and offers robust quality assurance, which reduces complacency. This approach reduces the likelihood of the agency approving foster carers who are not motivated to foster to help children to achieve.

Complaints, practice concerns and allegations are few. Those sampled had been dealt with fairly and thoroughly. Foster carers are assured that they have access to independent support from an external agency in the event of an allegation or complaint. The registered manager said, 'Where we see that there are issues we work to address things quickly.' There is a culture of confidence and transparency because both the carers and the children are clear about what to expect in the event of concerns being raised.

Unannounced visits happen in line with regulation. Supervising social workers make a point of developing relationships with the children in placement to ensure that the standard of care that they are receiving reflects the agency's expectations. This approach, alongside the expectation that the children routinely provide feedback to the agency about their experiences of being looked after by their carer, helps to provide another layer of safeguarding for every child.

Foster carers' annual reviews are held in the carers' homes. This approach means that the carers' home circumstances, and any changes within the household, remain in clear focus by the agency. Carers welcome this approach to the review process. Mindful of the need to remain objective and to avoid complacency, the registered manager is actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the service. This enables her to identify and act where carers may require additional support or resources to help with any particular challenges that arise, either from a child in placement or a change in the foster family's position.

The views and experiences of the children whose families foster is important to this agency. One of the team is taking forward a project to encourage birth children to have their say about their experiences of fostering. This shows that this agency is very aware of, and wants to have conversations about, the wider impact of fostering on the extended families.

The children have confidence in the adults involved in this agency. The children know that they have a selection of adults to approach at times of worry or concern. The children particularly like having access to the participation workers. The agency has made a considered choice to create these posts. The participation workers approach to working with the children comes from recent research about effective models of participation. The workers spend focused time encouraging the children to lead the discussion and initiate action. This approach ensures that the voice of the child is central to how their care is delivered. The workers also proactively seek the children's ideas about what the agency could do to improve their experiences. A group of children, called 'Voices', act as consultants to the agency. The participation workers also run innovative workshops and support groups for the parents of the parent and child placements. This helps to teach parents about how to safeguard their child in a supportive environment, because the meetings encourage them to learn additional parenting skills. This innovative practice is worthy of further dissemination.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The directors of the agency are the responsible individual and the registered manager. They are very experienced in social care, and together they started the service. They remain firmly at the helm of this tailor-made provision and their close involvement with the service means that they remain clear about their objective. Their shared vision is that children receive excellent care from nurturing foster carers, which helps each child to reach their potential, and this is evident in the service. The statement of purpose states that the service is, 'Dedicated to turning lives around.'

The responsible individual and registered manager work hand-in-glove with the staff team. Their different strengths and abilities complement one another to ensure that the well-being of the children, the carers and the staff are central to decisions made. They are highly visible, which enables them to model to the children, the foster carers and the staff their high expectations and aspirations.

The size of the service means that the leaders and managers have a very knowledgeable understanding of the key issues within the service. This means that they can make decisions based on the needs of the children and the carers. Efficient quality assurance processes mean that the registered manager has oversight of the quality of work being produced by the supervising social workers and the foster carers. This means that, when required, she can take action to shape the next steps. For example, when carers require specific training, because they are looking after a child with a particular need, this is quickly sourced.

The managers and leaders know the children and the carers by name and are proactive to address issues swiftly. For example, they are quick to draw to the attention of other agencies and placing authorities any shortfalls in approach which may be having a direct impact on that child. For example, when proposals from other agencies about education, health or placement planning require further action to ensure a more positive outcome for the child. The professional yet clear approach ensures a holistic and methodical approach to supporting children in every aspect of

their development.

The directors are forward-looking, and are motivated to make sure that the service keeps up to date with current research and practice. Resources are available to make sure that the foster carers and staff have access to the right kind of training to meet their needs and any interests that they develop. The foster carers speak highly of the training that they receive and how helpful the opportunities are for building their confidence and professionalism.

The annual foster carers' conference, introduced since the last inspection, provides dedicated time for external speakers to come to the service to share their knowledge in areas such as child sexual exploitation, attachment and radicalisation. This innovative arrangement gives the carers and the staff another platform to network and shares new ideas and information about the most effective and professional routes for helping and supporting children who have experienced or witnessed early childhood trauma.

The directors are supported by a highly organised business manager and a team of administrators. The structural arrangements enable all of the team, including the supervising social workers, to work efficiently, effectively and to get things done for the good of the children. One member of the team said, 'If we need something for example, for one of the children or one of the carers we don't have to wait around for decisions. We ask one of the directors, and it just happens.' This means that the foster carers and their supervising social workers can focus on what the solutions are.

Feedback from commissioning teams is overwhelmingly positive. Placing agencies have confidence that the agency will deliver what they say they can. More than one placing social worker said that the services that their child receives are 'excellent'.

The responsible individual said, 'Our aim is to provide the best possible services for the children. To do that it is our duty to make sure that the foster carers receive the best possible support and for that to happen they, in turn, must be supported by staff who are skilled, experienced and knowledgeable.' The children represented in this inspection were able to reflect that this is their experience of this agency.

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: SC469688

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