

Alpha Plus Fostering Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

Unique reference number	SC069335
Inspection date	06/06/2014
Inspector	Monica Hargreaves
Type of inspection	Full
Provision subtype	

Setting address	Hollinwood Business Centre, Albert Street, Oldham, Greater Manchester, OL8 3QL
Telephone number	01616842323
Email	info@alphaplusfostering.co.uk
Registered person	Alpha Plus Fostering Limited
Registered manager	Christine Marie Clynch
Responsible individual	Iain Anderson
Date of last inspection	18/11/2010

© Crown copyright 2014

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

Service information

Brief description of the service

Alpha Plus Fostering Services is an independent fostering agency. It provides a service for looked after children, referred to the agency from local authorities. A range of foster carers are provided. They are recruited, trained, assessed, reviewed and supervised by the agency. The premises are in appropriate offices on a business park, close to motorway and public transport links.

At the time of this inspection, the agency was providing placements for 109 children in 88 fostering households.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: An agency demonstrating and exceeding the characteristics of a good judgement where children and young people are making significantly better progress and achieving more than was expected in all areas of their lives.

Good: An agency where children and young people, including those with the most complex needs, have their individual needs met and their welfare safeguarded and promoted. They make good progress and receive effective services so they achieve as well as they can in all areas of their lives.

Requires improvement: An agency that may be compliant with regulations and observing the national minimum standards but is not yet demonstrating the characteristics of a good judgement. It therefore requires improvement to be good. There may be failures to meet all regulations or national minimum standards but these are not widespread or serious; all children's and young people's welfare is safeguarded and promoted.

Inadequate: An agency where there are widespread or serious failures which result in children and young people not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Overall effectiveness

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

This is an outstanding independent fostering agency that is managed very well. The registered manager is suitably qualified and very experienced and has a highly visible presence within the agency. She knows the children and carers very well. She leads by example and works hard to ensure that children, young people and carers have the highest quality service possible. The monitoring arrangements are extremely robust, ensuring that there is excellent oversight of the safety and well being of young people and the progress they make.

The manager has developed highly effective relationships with placing authorities

ensuring that carer recruitment is targeted to meet the needs of children and young people requiring placements. The manager's links with partner organisations, such as police, safeguarding teams and health agencies, are equally effective, ensuring that children and young people are protected when they are in placement and their needs are met.

The carer assessment process is extremely thorough. Comprehensive reports are presented to the foster panel well within the required timescales, ensuring that the agency maintains the carers' interest and enthusiasm. Reports demonstrate a robust assessment of carers' strengths and their life events and how these affect their capacity to parent effectively and to understand the needs of young people living away from home. The foster panel works very effectively to make clear recommendations about carers. The agency decision maker scrutinises panel papers thoroughly before making a decision to approve. This is also done in a timely way so that there is no delay for carers. These arrangements ensure the safety and suitability of carers.

Young people and carers are carefully matched. Professionals report that this is a real strength of the service. As a result, placement stability is very good and there is a low number of placement breakdowns. Consequently, young people enjoy settled placements which helps them to make excellent progress.

Young people develop positive relationships with their carers. They report that they are helped to feel part of their foster families and that they feel safe. They have healthy lifestyles and overall have excellent school attendance. All young people make very good progress in education from their original starting point and a number make exceptional progress. Young people are supported very well to prepare for independence and they have aspirations for their future which includes further and higher education. Young people develop confidence and self-esteem over time in their foster placements. They are involved in all the decisions that are made about their daily lives and long term care plans. They are also encouraged to give their views about the service itself and ways in which it might continue to improve.

Carers feel strongly that the contribution they make to the lives of the young people they look after is recognised and valued by the agency. They report that they are supported very well by their supervising social workers and that supervision is also appropriately challenging. This view is encapsulated by one carer who said 'My supervising social worker knows my children well. She goes the extra mile and makes sure she gets to know them. She gives me ideas and strategies which helps me understand the children's behaviour. She is supportive and knowledgeable. But she listens and values my experience also'.

The agency demonstrates a very strong commitment to developing the skills of carers through learning. In addition to the comprehensive training plan that is available to all carers, specific training sessions are arranged for those carers who look after children and young people with additional and complex needs. Carers are extremely enthusiastic about the training they are given, reporting that training is 'fantastic' and 'brilliant'. One carer said 'I am extremely impressed with the level of

service, and training we have received. I feel empowered and able to support the young people in my care.' The direct work that the agency undertakes with young people is also of the highest quality, underpinning the care they are given by their foster carers and helping them to make excellent progress in all areas of their lives from their individual starting points.

Areas for improvement

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that prompt action is taken to address any issues of concern that are identified, specifically in relation to getting the balance right between robust challenge of practice and risk of disrupting placements. (NMS 25.8)

Experiences and progress of, and outcomes for, children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Young people are cared for very well. Their needs are fully met by their carers, with additional support where necessary. Consequently, they make exceptional progress overall from their original starting point.

Young people benefit greatly from the very good relationships that they enjoy with their carers and they feel that they are fully included in their foster carers' families. The quality of those relationships is evident from the many positive comments about carers that they made during the inspection. For example, one young person said 'Life is so much better and I am happier. I feel loved and cared for and listened to'. Another young person said 'they are amazing and do everything to keep me safe'.

Children and young people have an excellent level of attendance at school or college, with almost all consistently achieving over 96% and a number of young people regularly achieving 100%. As a result, their level of attainment improves significantly. Young people performed very well in their end of year tests, the majority reaching level 4 in English and maths. Young people who were eligible also achieved good grades in public examinations. This was a significant achievement for some young people who had previously struggled to engage with education. Young people have genuine aspirations for their future which will improve their chances in later life. These include further and higher education and apprenticeships. Young people develop independent living skills in order to equip them to move into their own accommodation when they leave care. Some young people choose to remain with their carers under 'staying put' arrangements to support their transition into adulthood.

Young people are very enthusiastic about the wide range of activities that are available to them. These include youth groups, sports clubs, dance and drama

workshops, horse riding and basketball. Involvement in these activities broadens young people's experiences, helps them to make and sustain friendships and to develop a wide range of skills, all of which increases their self confidence. Young people also enjoy holidays with their carers. This supports their sense of belonging to their foster family and helps them to feel settled.

The care young people experience with their carers helps them to develop self-esteem and self-control. In addition, they are able to attend a range of workshops and training opportunities which are facilitated by the agency. These sessions enable them to learn how to take responsibility for their own behaviour. Consequently the behaviour of some young people has improved significantly over time. The progress that young people make in this regard has been commented on by professionals outside the agency. For example one stakeholder said '(name) behaviour is now very good. this is a significant improvement as (name) had struggled with behaviour previously'.

Young people enjoy good health. Their physical and emotional health needs are well met in their foster placements and they are encouraged from an early age to learn about healthy lifestyles. All young people, including those with complex health needs, have access to any additional services they might need to promote their good health.

Young people confirm that they are given frequent opportunities to express their views about every aspect of their care. For example, they give feedback about their carers for their annual review and they contribute to their own reviews. They are also involved in aspects of the work and development of the service. For example, they are supported to be involved in areas of carer and staff training and recruitment and they recently developed an information booklet for the birth children of foster carers. This encourages young people to feel that they are listened to and their views matter.

Young people remain in touch with their family members, when it is safe and in their best interests to do so. This benefits them emotionally and helps to support their sense of identity.

Quality of service

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

The agency has a clear strategy for the recruitment of carers and the manager and staff work very effectively with commissioners to ensure that they recruit carers who are able to meet the complex and challenging needs of the children and young people commissioners seek to place.

The agency has extremely robust arrangements in place for the preparation and assessment of carers, with a strong emphasis on safe care and safeguarding. Assessments of prospective carers are undertaken by qualified social workers who present detailed reports to the fostering panel. The agency has developed a central list that is sufficient to ensure each panel is suitably constituted. This is made up of a

number of independent professionals from a variety of backgrounds and includes a legal representative, a general practitioner and an experienced independent foster carer. The foster panel is chaired by a very experienced independent professional with a strong background in safeguarding. These arrangements ensure that foster panel members have the knowledge and expertise to make effective recommendations that are focussed on ensuring the safety and welfare of children and young people. The agency decision maker acts promptly on the recommendations made by the panel.

Excellent training opportunities enable carers to further develop their knowledge and skills so that they can better support the young people in their care. Carers are enthusiastic about the broad range of training that the agency offers and report that they particularly value being encouraged to help to deliver some of this training themselves. In addition to working with groups of carers, the agency regularly provides training on an individual basis to carers to help them to meet the complex health, emotional and communication needs of the young people they look after. For example some carers have been able to study for a diploma in mental health and others have been trained to communicate with young people using signing. The overwhelming majority of carers have completed the Training, Support and Development Standards for foster care, within the required timescales. This is significantly above the national average.

Young people are carefully matched to carers. The agency works hard to obtain detailed information about young people to ensure that they are placed with carers who can best meet their identified needs. Placing social workers are sent a pen picture of carers so that these can be given to young people before they are introduced to their foster families. This supports young people at a time of transition. Foster carers and supervising social workers work very effectively with placing social workers. Carers are fully involved in the care planning and reviewing processes. They attend all reviews and other meetings that are held about young people and advocate on their behalf when they need to, demonstrating a clear commitment to ensuring that young people achieve positive outcomes.

Foster carers feel valued by the agency and report that they are respected as important members of the team working with young people. They are extremely enthusiastic about the support they receive from their supervising social workers and the agency generally. They report that the agency's approach is 'to spend whatever time is needed out of hours' with carers and young people to ensure that carers are supported to maintain placements for young people. The success of this work is indicated by the stability of placements generally. One carer commented 'it has been an amazing experience fostering with this agency' and another said 'I am extremely impressed with the level of service and training we have received. I feel empowered and able to support the young people in my care.' In addition to social workers, the agency employs two very experienced dedicated support workers. They undertake direct work with children and young people and carers on a range of issues, for example, around education, self harm, challenging behaviour and independence skills. This enables carers to continue to provide an excellent quality of care. The agency also provides really exceptional support to foster carer's own children, which

supports stable family life. This aspect of the agency's work is recognised and highly valued by carers.

The manager and staff work very effectively with placing authorities to ensure that young people achieve the best possible outcomes. Professionals report that the manager is extremely proactive and 'robustly challenges' placing authorities when necessary in order to achieve the best for young people. Social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers and commissioning managers, made positive comments about the work of the agency and the progress that young people make with foster carers. For example, one professional said 'Placement offered to the children has been fantastic - supportive and structured with the foster carer being approachable and communicating well' and another said that the working relationship with the agency and carers is 'absolutely excellent and (name) has blossomed in this placement'.

Safeguarding children and young people

Judgement outcome: **outstanding**.

Safeguarding children and young people has an extremely high priority in the service and there are very effective arrangements in place to ensure that young people are protected from abuse. Vetting procedures for staff and panel members are extremely thorough, ensuring that individuals are safe and suitable. The process for assessing and approving carers is rigorous ensuring that the service recruits carers who are safe. The agency provides a comprehensive range of training for carers on safeguarding matters which covers issues such as sexual exploitation, children missing from home and 'e' safety. There is a specific carer training module that deals with issues of past abuse and how this impacts on children and young people. Carers demonstrate an excellent understanding of how past abuse affects young people and how they can support them. Carers and professionals involved with the service reported that the agency works in a very transparent way sharing all information openly. This promotes a culture of open communication which helps to ensure the safety of young people.

The manager has strong links with the Local Safeguarding Children's Board and the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) for child protection. Any investigations into allegations or suspicions of harm are handled extremely effectively to ensure that there is support and protection for children and young people as well as information and support to carers who are the subject of allegations. Professionals from outside the agency who contributed to the inspection reported that the agency's response to safeguarding concerns is extremely robust.

Comprehensive care plans ensure that foster carers have the information they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the young people in their care. Extremely thorough risk assessments are undertaken as part of the matching process to ensure that all possible areas of concern for young people and carers are considered. Foster carers prepare a safe care policy that addresses all aspects of household routines and safety. These are kept under review by carers and their supervising social

workers to ensure that they remain relevant and effective.

Supervising social workers undertake very regular visits to carers. They see young people in placement during some of their visits. This enables them to develop meaningful relationships with young people and ensures that young people have additional adults who they can talk to if they wish. Unannounced visits to foster carer's homes take place twice a year and health and safety risk assessments are regularly reviewed. These arrangements ensure that the safety and well-being of young people is closely monitored by the agency.

There is a low incidence of children and young people going missing from care. The likelihood of this is carefully considered when a young person is placed and is identified in their plans. The agency has a clear protocol for managing such incidents. Carers have a good understanding of the protocol, which is incorporated into their handbook. Consequently, they know what action they should take to protect young people if they do go missing.

The agency helps young people to learn about personal safety in various ways. For example, staff have put on drama workshops on issues such as sexual exploitation for older children and 'stranger danger' for younger ones. All of the young people who contributed to the inspection reported a strong sense of safety and well being and made positive comments about this. One young person said about their foster family, 'I feel safe and I feel loved' and another said 'I feel safe and more relaxed'. Young people confirmed that carers support them to take age-appropriate risks and to develop an understanding of how to protect themselves. They know who they can talk to about any concerns they have. They said that they know how to complain, and that they would feel able to do so. They feel confident that they will be listened to and that they will be supported. Children and young people reported that there is no bullying in their foster homes. Some young people said that they had told their carers about being bullied at school and that their carers had dealt with this quickly. One young person said 'It wasn't the school who sorted it - it was my carer'. This contributes to young people's sense of safety.

Leadership and management

Judgement outcome: **good**.

The agency is managed very well by a qualified and experienced individual who models good practice and provides strong leadership to the team. She demonstrates a clear commitment to ensuring that young people are well cared for and fully supported to achieve to their optimum. This is confirmed by staff, carers and professionals involved with the agency. One commissioner said 'The manager is very, very proactive on behalf of young people and will always go the extra mile for them'.

Carers are supported by appropriately qualified and experienced social workers. All staff in the agency have regular supervision and an annual appraisal of their performance. This ensures that their work is monitored and that staff are able to identify areas of their work they wish to develop. Morale within the staff team and

amongst carers is high. This is reflected in the quality of their work with children and young people.

The manager has developed very effective working relationships with placing authorities. Professionals involved with the agency made many positive comments about the service and the foster carers. For example, one Independent Reviewing Officer said 'I have always found this agency to be one of the very best that I deal with. The supervising social workers are very professional and organised. Their reports are of a high standard and really help me focus on the key issues to be addressed in reviews'.

There are robust monitoring arrangements in place in the agency. These ensure that there is excellent oversight of the work of the service. The manager makes sure that young people, carers and staff are consulted about the work of the agency.

The manager keeps up to date with current research and developments in fostering in order to inform future service developments. For example the manager is currently developing the work that the agency does in relation to child sexual exploitation. The manager also encourages carers to be trained to deliver training. Members of the team are also encouraged to be involved in research projects. For example, a member of the foster panel is taking part in a current university project looking at safe recruitment and the support of carers. This work contributes to the knowledge held within the team and supports on going improvements in practice.

The agency always seeks to balance the risk of disrupting young people's placements against the need to ensure that all carers work effectively with them in relation to training and supervision. On one occasion this has impacted adversely on timely interventions. However, this has not had a negative effect on children's welfare or safety. This is confirmed by external professionals. The agency resolved this situation during the inspection.

The agency's Statement of Purpose is clear and detailed. The manager has recently reviewed the document to ensure that it is up to date. It is available on the agency's web site, making it easily accessible to current and prospective carers and professionals. Guides for young people are produced in formats that are age appropriate and relevant to their needs. In addition, the manager has had the guides printed in other languages to reflect the needs of those young people who do not have English as a first language. These documents provide children and young people with good information about fostering, this particular agency and their rights in care.

A recommendation about foster panel membership was made at the previous inspection. In order to meet this recommendation, the manager and foster panel chair attempted to recruit a young person who had been in care as a panel member. To date, this has not been possible. However, due to changes that have been made to the National Minimum Standards (NMS) since that inspection, this standard no longer applies. The current constitution of the foster panel fully meets the requirements of the fostering regulations and the NMS.

About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards and to support services to improve.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for the inspection of independent fostering agencies.