

Ascent Fostering Agency

Ascent Fostering Agency

Suite 5, First Floor, Hillcrest House, 51 Woodcote Road, Wallington, Surrey, SM6 0LT

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Ascent Fostering Agency is an independent fostering provider that is a limited company. The provider states in its statement of purpose that has a therapeutic approach to support children and young people who require foster care. The agency works with children and young people with complex care needs and offers bespoke care and support packages within a family setting.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 28 households. The agency was providing foster care for 42 children. Two young people were under staying put arrangements.

The manager has been registered with Ofsted since February 2024.

Inspection dates: 30 September to 4 October 2024

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: 14 March 2022

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

Children build trusting and secure relationships with their foster carers. Children benefit from highly individualised care, provided by exceptionally skilled foster carers. Children's previous trauma and the influence this has on their ability to form positive relationships are well understood by foster carers, staff, and managers. Foster carers demonstrate exceptional levels of resilience in their care of children with complex needs. Consequently, children experience high levels of stability and enduring relationships that continue into adulthood.

Children have opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities and leisure pursuits. Managers and staff work in partnership with a charity that provides children with opportunities in leadership, creative arts, drama, and football. Managers and staff organise trips to the seaside and picnics so that foster carers, children, and staff can meet and socialise together. At the time of the inspection, managers and staff were finalising arrangements for a group of children to travel to Botswana. These experiences, some of which are life-enhancing, improve children's self-esteem and confidence.

Children are listened to, and their opinions are highly valued by leaders and managers. A head of youth engagement and independence supports children to express their views about their experiences in foster care through a youth council. Staff supported two children to write a letter to their social worker expressing their views regarding the plans for them and their wish to remain within the fostering agency.

Children are exceptionally well supported by foster carers and staff to attend school and achieve their full potential. Therapists linked to the fostering agency collaborate with school staff to ensure children's needs are well understood and can be responded to effectively within the school setting. Mentors undertake one to one work with children to explore and eliminate barriers to attending school. One child talked about their success in achieving high grades in GCSE's which has enabled them to undertake an engineering course at college. Another young person is in the final year of a social work degree and stated that this would not have been possible without the ongoing support, beyond their fostering arrangement, by fostering managers.

A strength and uniqueness of this fostering agency is its work with birth and extended families. Children are supported by foster carers and staff to maintain safe and meaningful relationships with birth parents and relatives. Therapists also undertake work with families, when plans for a return to parents or other family members are planned for children. This provides children with continuity of care, through the promotion of parenting that supports a positive move from foster care.

Children of all ages are supported by foster carers and staff to develop their independence and social skills. The youth engagement and independence lead has developed a qualitative independence programme which enables foster carers and children to work together to monitor and celebrate children's progress. The programme enables other staff and professionals working with children to add information, providing a fuller picture of the progress of children.

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

Managers lead by example in promoting an exemplary safeguarding focus, where the approach is one of 'doing with, not to' children. Detailed safety plans are informed by a thorough consideration of children's past experiences. This means that staff and foster carers are pro-active and confident in responding to potential risks, significantly reducing the potential of harm to children. Notifications to Ofsted regarding serious incidents involving children are minimal.

Mentors work alongside foster carers and staff to address any concerns regarding children's safety with them. This can range from risks within the community, such as criminal or sexual exploitation to risks within the home such as access to social media. Children say that they feel safe, understand the risks in the community and have someone they can talk to if they have a worry or concern.

Children receive support to manage their own behaviour and feelings. Managers have recently published an emotional well-being guide for children and young people. The guide provides strategies for children and young people to use when they recognise that they may be experiencing stress. This is an excellent child friendly resource, which is well used by foster carers and children alongside therapeutic and mentoring support.

The high standard of foster carers, of the support and oversight that they receive and of the agency's rigorous approach to safeguarding mean that allegations of harm in relation to foster carers are very rarely a feature of this agency. When this does occur, effective communication and liaison with the safeguarding network takes place. The support needs of both children and foster carers are fully considered by leaders and managers. Leaders and managers evaluate actions in response to such incidents to ensure that well informed learning takes place to reduce the likelihood of any further allegations.

Children are rarely reported missing from foster homes by their foster carers. Managers, staff, and foster carers understand the importance for children of developing positive relationships with birth families and parents. When children do go missing, this is usually to see birth family members. Consequent, effective communication between birth families and foster carers, strengthens the safeguarding network for children.

Foster carers and staff receive extensive and specific training in relation to keeping children safe. One foster carer described training they receive as high quality and helps them to keep children safe. Managers and staff run a regular 'Women's hour' session, where carers meet to talk about the specific risks that face girls and young woman. These sessions allow carers to share experiences, knowledge, and gain support to the benefit of keeping children safe.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

An experienced and suitably qualified manager manages this small fostering agency. The manager is part of an exceptionally skilled and experienced senior management team, who are inspirational, confident, and ambitious for children and influential in changing the lives of those in the care of the agency. Research informed practice continues to develop from a strong and confident base. Innovative approaches, such as the therapeutic analysis of prospective foster carers capacity, the use of a therapeutic pre-planning meeting between the foster carers and network around the child and podcasts on topical themes relating to children in foster care, are just some examples of excellent practice that are worthy of sharing with the wider social care network.

A strength of this fostering agency is that it has a range of highly skilled and experienced staff, practitioners, and external therapists to support foster carers and children. This includes mentors, therapeutic consultants, therapeutically trained fostering staff and foster carers. Leaders and managers recruit staff to the agency in line with safer recruitment procedures. Leaders and managers co-ordinate a highly effective 'wrap around' service for children.

Leaders and managers have excellent and collaborative working relationships with responsible authorities, parents, and professionals to assist in securing positive outcomes for children. One local authority commissioning team stated that the carers put forward for their children were, 'in the main extremely good and in some cases exceptional.' Another commissioning team wrote, 'In our experience they deliver on outcomes agreed at placement matching and the actions are reviewed to promote continued progress for the children.'

Staff receive regular and reflective supervision from managers, which is focussed on children's needs, and support to foster carers. Staff report that they are well supported and are valued by managers. The level of training available to staff is outstanding. Leaders and managers place a strong emphasis on professional development and support to staff. Leaders and managers have achieved, external awards or externally verified qualifications for the quality of their investment in and support to their staff. An ethos of 'high support and high challenge' drives the pursuit of excellence and supports an environment where good practice can thrive, and innovative ideas can flourish.

Carers receive regular and effective supervision. The training opportunities for foster carers is excellent. In addition, each fostering household has a therapeutic

consultant linked to them. This enables foster carers to reflect on their responses to children's trauma and adjust their parenting to better match children's needs. The fostering review process is highly effective and ensures foster carers continue to be suitable to undertake the fostering task. Foster carers described the fostering agency as 'unique, no one else does what Ascent does,' 'it's like being part of a family, a community,' 'training is on point,' 'they are constantly thinking outside the box' and 'the mentorship aspect has helped us navigate the complex world of fostering with confidence.'

The agency fostering panel acts as a highly effective quality assurance mechanism for assuring that only the right people are approved as foster carers and re-approved. Panel members come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, which enhances the quality of consideration of cases presented. Recruitment of foster carers follows a clear process with senior managers involved at an early stage to ensure that prospective carers have the potential to work within the ethos of the agency.

This is a reflective and learning agency. Managers continually strive to improve the quality of care and experiences for children in foster care. Managers welcome feedback and consult widely with key stakeholders to improve services and support to children and foster carers. Leaders and managers have highly effective mechanisms in place to monitor the quality of care provided. Managers know the strengths and areas for improvement and have a strong drive to do better, going 'above and beyond' to achieve this.

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: SC458129

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Inspector

Colin Bent, social care inspector

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