

# Aspire Foster Care Ltd

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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## 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.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Aspire Foster Care Ltd (hereinafter Aspire) is an independent fostering agency, first registered on 1 April 2006. It is a Christian organisation which seeks to uphold the values and ethos of its faith through its work. Aspire's Statement of Purpose establishes that it provides short term, long term, sibling, parent and child, respite, emergency and task centred placements. It undertakes recruitment, assessment, support and training of foster carers. At the time of the inspection Aspire supported 14 foster families with 15 children and young people in placement.

### Summary

This is a full, key inspection which was announced. It focuses on the 18 key standards relevant to this agency. These include national minimum standards relating to health, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and organisation. They do not include standards in relation to achieving economic well-being. The inspection also included National Minimum Standard four, relating to monitoring and controlling. The inspection found Aspire to be satisfactory overall with outstanding practice in helping children and young people to be healthy and to enjoy and achieve.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

### Improvements since the last inspection

Following the last inspection four statutory requirements were imposed on Aspire. Aspire was required to ensure that written consent to medical treatment and all relevant background information was provided by the local authority for all children and young people. The agency has made some progress although it is often hindered by the failure of the local authority to co-operate. However, the agency is not maintaining detailed records to evidence the work they are undertaking to ensure sufficient information is sought. The agency was required to put in place arrangements for deputising in the manager's absence. This has been achieved. The agency was required to ensure that the Responsible Individual ensured a system for monitoring the service was in place. Work on this requirement has been hindered by the unplanned departure of the Responsible Individual. The new Responsible Individual is aware that this area of practice requires attention. Aspire have sought to ensure, within the limits of their authority, that children and young people receive their statutory visits from their responsible social workers. Aspire has addressed all the recommendations raised at the last inspection. The agency has introduced a comprehensive, carer-held health record for each child and young person. The agency ensures that clear guidance is provided on behaviour management issues concerning sanctions and restraint. It ensures that the local authority social worker and the child or young person are involved in discussions about appropriate interventions. The agency has followed appropriate arrangements in relation to a child or young person's absence from home without authority. Aspire has provided each foster carer with documents relating to the children's rights department in their local authority. Foster carers have been supported in the development of their advocacy role. This has become a particular strength of the agency and its foster carers. The agency has ensured that foster carers are prepared to undertake leaving care work with young people placed with them. Foster carers have taken a pro-active role in assisting moves into independent living in the face of lack of activity by the local authority. The agency is now

undertaking unannounced visits in line with a newly introduced procedure for ensuring they are completed at least annually.

### **Helping children to be healthy**

The provision is outstanding.

Aspire's outstanding practice promotes improved outcomes for children and young people's health. The agency ensures that sufficient health information is gathered prior to placement. This enables the agency to identify the foster carer who will be most able to meet the health needs of the child or young person. The agency insists that health training is provided to foster carers before placement if they will be required to undertake new medical procedures or understand complex health issues. Children and young people are registered with primary health care services without delay. The agency trains foster carers in first aid. Other training related to the needs of specific children is provided directly to individual foster carers through a variety of media. Aspire provides guidance on health related matters in the foster carers' handbook which addresses medical and lifestyle issues. The agency has been successful in promoting the role of the foster carer as advocate for the child or young person's health. Examples were seen of a foster carer insisting a hospital carry out an immediate medical investigation which turned out to be life-saving and foster carers gaining the support of paediatricians in accessing essential resources for children. Foster carers demonstrate confidence in these interactions and effectiveness in meeting the immediate medical needs of children and young people placed. This has been strengthened by the recruitment of a number of foster carers with backgrounds in health or child care. They demonstrate considerable knowledge of health and developmental issues. The agency recruits foster carers who have the skills, competences and knowledge to intervene positively in the health of children and young people. Aspire supports foster carers in this work. In supervision the agency asks foster carers to reflect on health outcomes and work which remains to be undertaken. The supervising social workers access information for foster carers who need further advice. The agency has developed a good working relationship with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service whose work is supported by foster carers. This ensures that foster carers are supported by skilled professionals in meeting the emotional needs of children and young people placed with them. Foster carers maintain a health record for each individual child. This enables them to maintain consistent and comprehensive information about health. They are confident about the arrangements for medical consent although not all local authorities are consistent in providing written confirmation of it. Foster carers encourage children and young people to develop healthy lifestyles through fitness and diet. They encourage and support young people to give up smoking. The practices of the agency and the foster carers in relation to health is having a demonstrable impact on the health outcomes of children and young people placed.

### **Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe**

The provision is satisfactory.

Practices and procedures at Aspire to keep children and young people safe are generally sound with some areas for improvement. The agency has sound practices in recruitment and staff vetting which ensure that all who work with children and young people are suitable to do so. They have the necessary skills and qualifications to fulfil their roles. Staff files are well-maintained and evidence the application, vetting and interview process which applicants undertake. There were minor gaps in recording of telephone checks and one photographic identification was absent. Staff are subject to ongoing appraisal to ensure their continued

suitability. Aspire has two social workers who have a wide range of skills, a good knowledge of child development and high levels of competency. The agency has not been carrying out the required checks in relation to foster panel members. The Registered Manager accepts that these shortfalls have arisen due to some confusion about the required extent of the checks. Although no panel member has direct contact with children, in assessing the suitability of foster carers, they influence decisions about the capacity of potential foster carers to protect children. The vetting checks are necessary to ensure that they are suitable to take such decisions. Aspire ensures that the foster homes are suitable for children and young people. This is achieved through health and safety checks, unannounced visits and training in health and safety. The registered manager acknowledged that one foster carer was not keeping all medication in a locked cabinet and took immediate action to address this. It is the expectation of the agency that children and young people will be protected from medication hazards in this way. The agency requires children and young people to have their own bedrooms unless they are siblings and it is in their best interests to share. The agency will not permit three unrelated children to be placed in a foster home. Homes visited during the inspection were welcoming, comfortable and child-friendly. Children and young people had contributed to the décor of their rooms and were proud of their belongings, toys and things they had made. The agency's expectations of the home environment enables children and young people to feel safe and confident in their foster homes. This increases the likelihood of placement stability. They are protected from danger in the home and its surroundings. Aspire has achieved good levels of placement stability with very few unplanned disruptions to placements. This is contributed to by the quality of matching which is undertaken. Foster carers are involved in placement decisions and the agency gives consideration to the capacity of foster carers to meet specific needs. The agency turns down placements when they do not have a foster carer available with the right blend of skills or family make-up to meet the child or young person's needs. Foster carers are satisfied with the quality of matching achieved by the agency. The agency seeks full information on referral and consults with children and young people already in the home, the foster carers and local authority social workers. In most cases placement planning will include a period of introductions for the child or young person, enabling them to become familiar with the foster carers before moving into the home. This increases the likelihood of a placement lasting. Although outcomes for children and young people and their own views demonstrate that good matching is being undertaken, the agency is not evidencing this on the case record. Likewise, although staff were able to outline the issues which they would take into account in assessing risk in relation to a placement, they do not keep a record of the assessment or its subsequent reviews. The agency relies on the general risk assessment provided by the referrer where they are in place. The agency does not put in place foster placement agreements for each individual placement, largely due to the refusal of a local authority to co-operate. These shortfalls reduce the integrity of the record which describes why a child or young person has been placed with a particular foster carer, the additional support that will be necessary and the role and responsibility of the foster carer in relation to a particular child. The welfare of children and young people is safeguarded through the child protection procedures operated by the agency. Foster carers and staff are confident about the procedures and are guided in their application by training, supervision and guidance. Any shortfalls in practice are addressed by the agency. Some foster carers exceed expectations in recording to ensure that a full record is maintained of incidents relating to children. They are seeking to develop their own practice through this tool and to reduce the likelihood of a child being subjected to investigations due to the lack of an adequate record. Foster carers are aware of the procedures for a child absent without permission and are using them appropriately. A safe care policy is completed for each individual placement. It reflects

the needs of the specific child or young person and those already living in the household. They are reviewed where new information indicates further safeguards are required. Foster carers show a good understanding of the function of the policies and the need to involve the child or young person in understanding them. The agency trains all foster carers in safer caring. The fostering panel operates as an effective gatekeeper for assessments of prospective foster carers. Minutes demonstrate that consideration of assessments is rigorous and challenging. The panel chair regularly attends training on their role and operates effectively in managing decision making. The reasons for decisions are not explicitly recorded. This is necessary to assist the agency decision maker to make a fully informed decision about the suitability of foster carers, taking into account the recommendation of the panel. The panel includes a blend of backgrounds and professional expertise. At present it does not include a member with expertise in child health or someone who has been fostered or had a child fostered. The panel has access to the opinion of a medical professional about contraindications to fostering. At present the panel does not formally receive management information about foster carer reviews which have been undertaken without reference to it. This contributes to the panel's shortfalls in its quality assurance role. A number of changes in personnel has reduced the panel's focus on this role. The Registered Manager indicated that the agency will be establishing processes by which the panel can monitor effectiveness and improve practice in the assessment of prospective foster carers. Children and young people indicate that they feel safe with their foster carers. The limited number of concerns raised indicates the effectiveness of the agency's protocols and ethos in protecting children and young people from abuse. However these protections could be compromised in the future by the shortfalls identified.

## **Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do**

The provision is outstanding.

Aspire is making an outstanding contribution to increasing the opportunity for children and young people to enjoy and achieve. The agency operates a very rigorous policy of matching ethnicity of children and young people to that of carers. It will not seek to make placements where there is not a substantial match. Foster carers understand the need to promote a child or young person's sense of identity. The assessment process tests the ability of foster carers to accept difference. The agency is seeking foster carers from a more diverse range of backgrounds to enable it to offer a wider range of well-matched placements. Specific examples were seen of foster carers working with children and young people to repair extremely damaged self-esteem and to establish a sense of identity independent of that as a victim of abuse. Key professionals indicate that foster carers are achieving excellent outcomes in enabling children to have more enjoyable lives. Foster carers have accessed a range of training to improve the life chances of children and young people placed, including promoting inclusion of children with learning disability and counselling. These measures have had a positive outcome for the self-esteem and sense of identity in children and young people placed. Aspire encourages and supports its foster carers to advocate effectively for children and young people in relation to education. The foster carers have become skilled and confident in undertaking this work. They take the primary responsibility for identifying appropriate educational placements, liaising with schools and local education authorities and undertaking the role of the parent in relation to school meetings, events and activities. For older young people, foster carers have accessed additional support for their education, Connexions and other relevant agencies. Records relating to education are comprehensive and include information relating to exclusions and achievements. Foster carers help children and young people to improve their educational outcomes. They are supported in this work by supervision sessions which give regular consideration to matters of

education. There have been no permanent exclusions of young people from school since the last inspection. The agency supports foster carers in challenging decisions to exclude. The work of Aspire and the foster carers is allowing children and young people to acquire stable educational placements. This contributes significantly to long term outcomes in education for looked after children. Foster carers are providing outstanding support to children and young people to develop secure self-esteem and to achieve their potential in education.

### **Helping children make a positive contribution**

The provision is good.

Children and young people placed with Aspire are offered good support to maintain contact with friends and family and to influence their day to day care. The agency establishes arrangements for contact at the referral stage. It identifies foster carers who are able to meet the geographical requirements for contact and the emotional support children and young people need to maintain relationships with their families. The agency records arrangements for contact within the case file. The agency provides initial training to foster carers on the importance of contact and continues this through supervision. Foster carers work hard to maintain children and young people's contact with their siblings, over and above what is required. The placement of children for respite with their siblings in other placements allows children and young people concentrated time to develop these relationships. This good practice in supporting contact contributes to the development of emotional stability in children and young people. Foster carers continually seek the opinions of children and young people. They respond appropriately to these views. This enables children and young people to feel involved in decision-making about their day-to-day lives. Due to the small size of the agency, the Registered Manager and the supervising social workers are able to get to know each child and to spend time with them on visits. They seek their opinions for statutory and foster carer reviews. The agency solicits views from children and young people through regular questionnaires and is seeking to identify other ways to engage children and young people in development of the wider service. Various documents advertise the complaints procedure operated by the agency. The agency seeks to involve birth children through the assessment, approval and review processes. The willingness of foster carers to listen to children and young people and to take their views into account contributes to the levels of security they feel within their placements.

### **Achieving economic wellbeing**

The provision is not judged.

### **Organisation**

The organisation is satisfactory.

Staff at Aspire understand the ethos of the organisation and work consistently with it. The foster carers' handbook, the Statement of Purpose, policies and supervision contribute to the foster carers' understanding of the aims and objectives of Aspire. A children's guide introduces the children and young people to the role of the agency. Although the Statement of Purpose ensures that local authority social workers are aware of the aims and objectives of the agency, it does not include all the information required by the National Minimum Standards. This could inhibit a referring local authority from making a fully informed choice about placement. Over the past year the agency has not adequately quality assured and monitored the work it is undertaking. This has been partly as the result of the unplanned departure of the Responsible Individual. The effects of this are mitigated by the size and nature of the agency. The manager

is able to have close, daily oversight of work undertaken. However, the lack of effective quality assurance could reduce the quality of care offered as the agency grows. The new Responsible Individual is aware of the work which needs to be achieved in quality assurance to ensure good practice is embedded and poor practice addressed. Individual staff within the agency are keenly self-critical and expect high standards of their work. This has provided a counter-balance to the shortfalls in monitoring and quality assurance but places a heavy reliance on the effectiveness and self-evaluation skills of staff. There are clear management structures within the agency with a new system in place for deputising in the manager's absence. Staff understand their roles and lines of accountability. They are appropriately supported through professional supervision and ad hoc discussions with colleagues. There is a sufficient number of suitably qualified staff to ensure that foster carers are offered 24 hour support, enabling them, in turn, to offer support to the children and young people placed. Foster carers understand the range of support which is offered and access it appropriately. The agency has proved particularly effective at building a group of foster carers who are confident and able to deal with demanding situations without always requiring direct support. The agency provides good administrative support for the social work task. Staff are organised and managed in a way which delivers an effective and efficient service. The levels of support and effective arrangements allow foster carers to work well with children and young people placed. The agency has grown significantly since the last inspection and is entering a period of consolidation before further recruitment. Aspire has identified gaps in the range of foster carers it is able to offer which it aims to address in future recruitment. The agency undertakes comprehensive assessments of prospective foster carers. They are of a good standard and address the qualities, competences and aptitudes of applicants. The agency gives sufficient time to this process and aims to operate a high threshold for suitability. In this way Aspire recruits capable foster carers with a clear vocation to undertake this work with children and young people. Sound recruitment practices enable Aspire to meet the needs of children and young people placed with the agency. The agency has been undertaking comprehensive checks on people who provide overnight care for specific foster carers. However, this has not extended to assessment, approval and review. The agency had understood that this was not required but have now begun the process of undertaking this work in relation to all relevant carers. The Registered Manager has indicated that these support networks will not be used until the process has been completed. The agency maintains good quality, well-audited records on children. This contributes to the record of each child or young person's time in the looked after system. The agency trains foster carers in the maintenance of records and recording practices support difficult and demanding placements. The agency provides training in life story work and expects foster carers to maintain memorabilia of a child or young person's life. There are some shortfalls in the maintenance of the staff register and the record of placements for each foster carer. Otherwise records are well-maintained and easy to navigate. The agency generally has good practices in record keeping which aids consistent and informed practice with children and young people placed.

## What must be done to secure future improvement?

### Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
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8	ensure that before making a placement, the responsible authority enters into a written foster placement agreement with the foster carer relating to the child, which covers the matters specified in Schedule 6 (Regulation 34)	31 December 2007
15	ensure that full and satisfactory information is available in relation to all persons working for the purposes of the fostering service, with particular reference to information detailed in Schedule 1 (Regulation 20)	31 December 2007
30	ensure that the fostering panel makes a written record of the reasons for its recommendations (Regulation 25)	31 December 2007
4	ensure that the agency establishes and maintains a system for monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 7 at appropriate intervals and improving the quality of foster care provided by the fostering agency (Regulation 42)	31 December 2007
25	ensure that a record of each placement with a foster carer, including the name, age and sex of each child placed, the dates on which each placement began and terminated and the circumstances of the termination is included in the case record for each foster carer (Regulation 30)	31 December 2007
25	ensure that the agency maintains and keeps up to date the records specified in Schedule 2, with particular reference to the date of birth and qualifications relevant to, and experience of, work involving children of each person working for the fostering service (Regulation 22)	31 December 2007
17	ensure that the agency carries out an assessment of any person whom it considers may be suitable to become a foster carer, including those acting as respite foster carers for specific foster carers (Regulation 27)	31 December 2007
8	ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted through the completion of matching and risk assessment documentation to evidence the considerations undertaken in the initial placement and continued placement of children (Regulation 11).	31 December 2007

## Recommendations

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

- ensure that management systems are in place to collate and evaluate information on the circumstances, number and outcome of all allegations of neglect or abuse of a child in foster care and that the information is scrutinised regularly (National Minimum Standard 9.5)
- ensure that telephone enquiries are made as well as obtaining written references for all people working in or for the fostering service (National Minimum Standard 15.3)

- ensure that the fostering panel provides a quality assurance function in relation to the assessment process for prospective foster carers (National Minimum Standard 30.5)
- ensure that the independent members of fostering panel include, as far as possible, expertise in child health (National Minimum Standard 30.8)
- ensure that one of the independent members of the fostering panel is normally a person who has at any time been placed with foster carers or whose child has at any time been placed with foster carers (National Minimum Standard 30.9)
- ensure that the Statement of Purpose includes the outcome of complaints, the procedure and processes for reviewing foster carers, the relevant qualifications and experience of staff (National Minimum Standard 1.4)
- ensure that the fostering panel receives management information about the outcome of foster carers' annual reviews (National Minimum Standard 30.6)
- ensure that foster carers' homes are free of avoidable hazards in relation to the storage of medication (National Minimum Standard 6.6).

## Annex

## Annex A

### National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

#### Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

**Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.**

#### Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

**Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

**Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

**Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.**

#### Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

**Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.**

#### Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

**Annex A**

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

**Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.**