

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited

National Fostering Agency, 2 Quay View Business Park, Barnards Way, Lowestoft, Suffolk NR32 2HD

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This service is one registered branch of the National Fostering Agency. This private company operates throughout England, Wales and Scotland. The office for this service is based in Lowestoft and is registered to cover a geographical area which includes the North and East of England. The supervising social workers, who represent the majority of the workforce, are home based. The agency provides a service to 459 children by supporting and monitoring 362 approved fostering households.

Inspection dates: 24 to 28 April 2017

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

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

Date of last inspection: 6 October 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is good because:

- Children say that they receive good support and that they feel valued. A number of the children benefit from long-term placements.
- Foster carers describe good, consistent, solid support from the agency. The foster carers say that they can rely on their supervising social workers and the senior leaders to do what they say they will.
- The foster carers are responsive to the individual cultural needs of the children.
- Opportunities for carer and staff training are varied and stimulating.
- The placing local authority and social workers say that they can see that their children are making good progress.
- Commissioners say that the agency provides a good, reliable service.
- Supervising social workers are knowledgeable and come to know the carers and the children well.
- The agency is responsive to the needs of the foster carers and seeks to find solutions when problems occur.
- Allegations are appropriately referred to the designated officer. Complaints are investigated fairly. Information is appropriately shared with other members of the team around the child.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- At regular intervals, the agency must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report outlining the review of the quality of care.
- The agency needs to ensure that carer reviews take place annually.
- Arrangements and opportunities for children to input into their case records should be clearer and consistently encouraged.
- Carers should routinely receive copies of their supervision notes.
- The approach for recording, reviewing, and demonstrating the involvement of the carers and the children in evaluating and assessing risk needs to be clearer and consistently applied.
- The reasons for recommending approval to the agency decision maker needs to be clear. This is specifically about the span of age and the category for approval.

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

Statutory requirements

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

Requirement	Due date
A foster carer review must take place not more than a year after approval, and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary, but at intervals of not more than a year. (Regulation 28 (2))	25/08/2017
The registered person must provide the Chief Inspector with a written report in respect of any review conducted of the quality of care and, on request, to any local authority. (Regulation 35 (2))	25/08/2017

Recommendations

- Ensure that information about the child is recorded clearly and in a way which will be helpful to the child when they access their files, either now or in the future. Children are actively encouraged to read their files, other than necessarily confidential or third party information, and to correct errors and add personal statements. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 26.6)
- Ensure that supervision of foster carers is clear in purpose, and ensure that the foster carer is meeting the child's needs and taking into account the child's wishes and feelings. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 21.8). This is with specific reference to ensuring that foster carers consistently receive a written record of supervision.
- Implement a proportionate approach to any risk assessment. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 4.5). This relates to consistently monitoring and reviewing levels of risk and action taken by carers to reduce risks for all placements and, in particular, for those placements of unrelated children and/or adults who come to live as part of the fostering household.
- Ensure that written minutes of panel meetings are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members, and record the reasons for its recommendation. (Fostering services: National minimum standards, 14.7). This is with specific reference to the reason for approval age range and category of approval.

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The foster carers embrace the children into their lives. One carer said, 'Our child has become part of our family.'

Reflecting the placing authority plan long-term links means that a large number of the children benefit from the knowledge that they have stability and security. There are a growing number of carers interested in offering parent and child placements. Those carers can offer staying put arrangements. One carer said, 'One of our older foster children is at university and comes back during the holidays.' These arrangements provide those children with the same opportunities as their non-looked after peer group and offer the children additional time to prepare for adult life.

The agency does look after a large number of sibling groups. Supervising social workers are keen to develop relationships with the children. They get to know them well and this sets the scene for encouraging the children to have their say and to exercise their choice and voice. When possible, the children are matched with families of similar ethnicity. When this is not possible, individual foster carers take proactive action to ensure that they learn, and understand how to meet, the cultural needs of the children in their care. One carer said, 'I looked into what we needed to do to care for the children's skin and hair. I did my research in the same way I would do for one of my own children.'

This agency actively encourages foster carers to understand and to learn about the background and impact of each child's previous life experiences. The agency places a number of refugee and asylum-seeking children. There are routine discussions and communication between the supervising social workers about how to meet the unique needs of each child. This approach ensures that there is shared knowledge about an individual child between the agency and the foster carer. It means that thinking about children's cultural, dietary, and religious needs is embedded in planning and decision making. The agency provides each child with a guide about the service, and it describes what they can expect from their carer. The guide can be translated into any language or format for children who do not communicate verbally. A recent trial introduced a pack for children of Muslim faith, which includes a prayer mat. This thoughtful approach helps to welcome the children into the service, and is a symbol of intention to want to improve the quality of all children's experiences.

The agency uses an electronic system to record and upload written information. The system, tested by inspectors, is functional and can be navigated efficiently by staff. The system enables staff to record information for the children about their experiences and to make reference to progress and identify a range of outcomes for individual children. The agency does acknowledge that there is more work to be done to optimise how the information is received and used to evidence positive outcomes for children consistently. There is no current system to demonstrate how the children are actively encouraged to read their files and to routinely add their personal information effectively. This shortfall does not set the scene for

encouraging children's full participation in their experience of being looked after.

The vast majority of the 459 children who are of school age are formally learning or attending school. Foster carers encourage attendance and engagement with education by, for example, supporting children with their homework and school projects. For the few children who are waiting for the appropriate educational resource, carers engage with children creatively. For example, carers read and write with children, or help them to complete job applications. This support means that the children are encouraged to think about their future and to develop their unique skills.

The children are kept busy, and many take part in a myriad of after-school and weekend activities. This includes after-school sports, music lessons, cultural visits to museums and holidays. These opportunities enrich children's lives, improve confidence and enhance self-esteem, while setting the scene for the children to reach their learning and social potential.

The children receive help to maintain contact with their birth family, reflecting their wishes and the local authority plan. This support helps those children placed far from home to maintain their identity. The children are routinely registered and linked in with the health and well-being services located in the area they live in. For those children who may require additional support, the agency will advocate for this by approaching the placing local authority and, in some cases, will seek to provide additional services directly. There is a facility for supervising social workers and carers to receive bespoke guidance from a therapist when there are individual placement or behavioural challenges. These arrangements ensure that the right services are involved with the right children at the right time in their lives.

There are regular agency activity days. Carers and their children are involved in the planning and organisation of local events, which are designed to enable groups of children to come together and have fun. These events help the children to see that there are many other children like them living in foster care. One child said, 'When I go to the big events, I get to see some of my friends.' The agency creates opportunities from the events to do some consultation; however, at the same time, it recognises the need to, and is looking into, developing a more strategic approach to children's participation. Overall, however, there are sufficient systems and, therefore, opportunities for children to express their views and to have their say. For example, children are routinely invited to give feedback during supervising social workers' visits to the home and for their carers' annual reviews. The information is captured initially by supervising social workers and their managers, who are ready to share information more widely.

Carers confidently say that they receive good structured advice and guidance to help and support them in their endeavours to make a difference to children's lives. More than one carer said, 'I have had a change in supervising social worker. My last worker was very good and supportive, and my new worker is just as helpful and knowledgeable.' The result is that the carers feel that they, their families and the contributions that they make to support children, are valued.

Carers do receive regular supervision and, of the information sampled, there is evidence to show that the supervising social workers make notes from these

meetings. However, the custom and practice around carer supervision falls short; this is because not all foster carers receive a record of the points discussed and actions agreed from the meeting. Failure to provide carers with a record of areas discussed could lead to mistakes being made and information being missed. One carer said, 'I want to have a record of what we have talked about, because this is one way of helping me to develop my practice as a foster carer.'

There is an established out-of-hours duty system that is effective. The carers receive regular newsletters and information about the wider organisation. The variety of training available to the carers is a particular strength of this agency. Regular carer support groups enable those with more experience to share knowledge and ideas with those for whom fostering is new. This reduces the risk of carer isolation, helps to promote a sense of being part of a community and network of carers, and supports carers to provide a high standard of care for children.

Those carers who require additional support at times of ill health or family crisis describe a pragmatic and caring approach. One carer said, 'I became ill, and I was worried and upset that the children would be removed from our care, but the manager came to talk to me about what they could do to help me to continue to care for the children. I have recovered, and the children remain with us, and we have been able to continue with family life.' This approach helps the children who have experience of disrupted attachments to see that it is possible for families to adjust and work through unplanned life events.

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

The children know how to complain, and records sampled show that adults in their network do speak individually with those children about finding solutions to any identified problems. Issues are taken seriously and dealt with sensitively. This approach helps the children to learn how to resolve difficulties constructively and to feel that their experiences matter.

The children represented in this inspection say that they feel safe from harm and are confident that their carers know how to help and protect them. One child said, 'This is the best placement I have ever had.' Many of the children spoken to identify their lead foster carer as the person that they would go to if they had a concern or worry. The children do receive support to take risks appropriate to their age and stage of development. One carer said, 'We may not agree with everything that he does, but we are teaching him how to make safe decisions, and that means that we need to be there for him when he needs us every time.'

Through structured pre-approval training, the carers are introduced to the concepts guiding safer caring and permissible behaviour management practices. Post approval, face-to-face and online training provides the opportunity for all the carers to revisit safeguarding concepts more formally. The assessment process appropriately raises awareness of, and helps carers to work out, how they are going to manage any potential hazards in the household. This includes the safe storage of medication. The agency seeks to learn lessons where errors or mistakes occur, and this approach helps to reduce the likelihood of significant accident or injury.

There are ongoing opportunities to discuss behavioural strategies and risk management during carer consultations with the agency therapist, looked after reviews, and during discussions with supervising social workers. The vast majority of placements continue without significant incident.

Few children go missing or place themselves at risk intentionally. The children who are known to go missing receive a good response from the agency. There are effective reporting mechanisms, which enable the carers to seek advice and guidance about the actions and process to follow to ensure that children return as quickly as possible to the safety of their foster placement. One foster carer, who spoke about his experiences of working to successfully reduce periods of missing, said, 'Our child knew that it was our duty to report him missing.'

All of the children are routinely registered with general local health services. Those children whose behaviours show that they may benefit from more specialised help receive this, either directly from their carers, who are supported by their allocated supervising social worker, or from the input of other agencies, such as mental health services. A multi-agency approach helps to improve outcomes for the children.

The carers receive advice and guidance to prompt a mindful and vigilant approach when dealing with specific issues. For example, in relation to the use of the internet and access to social media, carers' training and support helps them to increase their understanding of issues relating to exploitation and radicalisation. The agency encourages carers to be curious and to share any information with the network which may, or may not be, of concern. One carer said, 'Although I have no concerns about radicalisation, I know that I need to remain aware of this as a possibility, and I have spoken to my supervising social worker about this.'

The agency does follow a matching process, and the examples sampled demonstrate, in most cases, the thinking behind the rationale to place a particular child or children with a particular carer. When children are placed in an emergency, the agency can demonstrate that they seek to gather additional information when this is not available at the point of referral from the placing authority. However, the written risk assessments completed following a child's arrival in placement do not go far enough to show the potential impact of any known, or potentially harmful, behaviours. The agency's failure to draw out and record the possible impact of, for example, placing non-related children in the same household, could result in carers' and children's safety being unnecessarily compromised; this, therefore, does not demonstrate a robust approach to this process of assessment.

The agency policy does not advocate the use of restraint as a strategy to manage behaviours. The carers are encouraged and helped to identify creative solutions to managing problematic behaviours and to implement natural consequences. One supervising social worker said, 'I was listening to my carers talk about how they had managed some challenging behaviours, and I was really impressed that they had opted for using consequences that the children understood. They tend not to ban this electronic device or that phone, but instead want the children to learn from their mistakes and what has happened.' This respectful approach to behaviour management sets boundaries, while encouraging the children to learn to trust the adults who care for them.

Records and discussion with the staff involved in the process show that a hardy approach to carer recruitment and retention ensures that only suitably appropriate adults become foster carers. One family attending a foster panel during this inspection said, 'The assessment was very good, and the process surprised us. It was intense, and there was a lot of questions about our family and our background. The assessing social worker also met with our older children.'

The central list of representatives available to sit on the agency fostering panel reflects a broad range of knowledge and experience. Membership includes individuals who currently foster with another agency, and the views of what matters to children who are looked after are represented. This rich selection helps to ensure a child-centred exploration of workers' assessments. The advisor to the panel is well informed about the fostering task and, therefore, able to professionally support the panel's navigation towards recommendation to the agency. Since the last inspection, the records of the panel minutes show improvement. This is because the reasons for recommending approval to the agency decision maker are recorded. However, the records continue to fall short; this is because the reasons do not go far enough to illustrate the rationale for the recommendation in relation to age range, gender, number or category for fostering. This shortfall includes carers who are experienced and are returning to the panel, where they have been the subject of allegation or complaint.

The staff undertake the required annual unannounced visits to carer households. The children and their bedrooms are seen, and the supervising social workers make it their business to develop relationships with all of the children in the household. Carers understand that it is their responsibility to act should they become aware of any adults' conduct or behaviour that causes concern. The individual and groups of carers spoken to knew how to contact senior managers and were confident that issues would be acted on. This culture of communication and discussion helps to keep children safe from harm.

Allegations are referred to the designated officer for the locality and shared with other agencies. Carers under investigation can access support externally and from other carers. One carer said, 'I am a mentor for other carers. I have had an allegation made about my practice. In my opinion, the agency looked into it fairly, and we were all able to work through it.'

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: requires improvement to be good

The previously registered manager retired from the agency in December 2015.

This one registered service covers a significant geographical spread from the North to the East of England. It was evident that the registered area has been operating as two parallel services, namely North and East of England, both with a distinctive staff and management collective, and overseen by members of the National Fostering Agency senior management team. The responsible individual accepts that, for the purposes of registration, the current lines of accountability are not sufficient and the result is that he has formalised his commitment to remedy the registration

arrangements. Ofsted awaits an application for an additional registration.

When the registered manager retired, the organisation did implement a contingency plan. An internal appointment provided a new manager, but the individual left the organisation without notice in October 2016. A second internal appointment, made from within the existing management structure, is currently applying for an application for registration with Ofsted.

The changes in management had an impact for some of the staff, and this meant that some key members left, resulting in vacancies and increased caseloads for some supervising social workers. However, posts have now been filled, and there is a commitment from the senior leaders to address the weaknesses and to move forward.

On the other hand, the foster carers that are aware of the internal changes in management say:

- 'Yes, there have been changes in management. The last managers were good, and the new managers are also good.'
- 'If they say they are going to do something, it happens.'
- 'They still offer the support that they always have done.'
- 'I know that I can contact any of the senior leaders if I need to.'

This agency has good professional working relationships with key stakeholders. Commissioners and the placing local authority's feedback is that communication is good, placement stability raises no specific concerns, and that the children using this service benefit from it.

Recruitment and vetting processes for staff and panel members are sufficiently thorough. Supervising social workers, who are new to the organisation, say that the induction process is clear and helpful in enabling them to understand their role and to make the transition from working in other settings. One said, 'The induction days at the head office are very useful and help me to understand the role.'

The staff receive supervision, and the frequency of this is improving. Annual appraisals sampled were of a very good standard and demonstrate that, in addition to the agency's expectation to meet regulation, there is a commitment to encouraging staff to pursue areas of professional interest. Some staff have students who are training. A recently introduced staff champion's network is a good example of how the agency expects the staff to develop their skill set.

There is a clear infrastructure within this organisation, which enables effective lines of accountability; this means that key activities, such as carer awards, are well established and take place routinely. There is a defined system in place to ensure that feedback is received from foster carers, the placing local authority social worker, and the children in placement, which adds to the quality of information available for carers' annual reviews. The agency policy reflects regulation in recognising that foster carers should be reviewed on an annual basis. Some carers are being reviewed annually; however, for a number of cases sampled, the annual review was very much out of time. This failure to meet regulation could result in a

delay in the agency failing to take action where carers no longer meet the required standard.

With all of the above in mind on a day-to-day basis, the complete current registration is now well run, and the agency continues to meet the aims and objectives described in the statement of purpose. Monthly management reports for the North and East provide a clear overview of the activities across this registered service. The reports outline any current issues, for example, complaints or carer issues. The wider organisation does have systems in place to seek to learn from, for example, safeguarding incidents which occur within the organisation, or in other social care settings. This approach to learning lessons from serious cases helps to strengthen practice. However, the service does not routinely send to Ofsted the required review of the quality of care, and this represents a failure to meet this regulation. This shortfall has no impact on children.

The managers and senior leaders take an active role in overseeing and monitoring the impact and the quality of the work. This enables them to make child-centred decisions and to have a firm grasp of the current shortfalls. The senior leaders are currently working, and taking decisive action, to strengthen weaknesses. For example, one senior manager has a new role specifically to improve practice. The senior managers say, 'Staff ask why do we need to self-assess, and we say it's because we want to know how good we are, and what we want to do to improve. This is our journey to excellence.' One member of staff said, 'Our senior managers are being very clear with us about what they want from us to improve. This clear direction is just what we need.'

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: SC038843

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