

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited
National Fostering Agency, Unit 2450, Regents Court, The Crescent, Birmingham
Business Park, Birmingham B37 7YE

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency is one of the English branches of the National Fostering Agency, which also operates in Scotland and Wales. This registered office is based in Solihull and covers the Midlands area. It provides a range of fostering placements, including parent and child, emergency, short- and long-term.

At 31 March 2017, the agency had 404 foster places, of which 242 were filled. At the same date, it had 296 foster carers in 171 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 June 2017

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account

requires improvement to be good

How well children and young people are helped and protected

requires improvement to be good

The effectiveness of leaders and managers

requires improvement to be good

The independent fostering agency is not yet delivering good help and care for children and young people. However, there are no serious or widespread failures that result in their welfare not being safeguarded or promoted.

Date of last inspection: 18 July 2014

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection

None

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency requires improvement to be good because

- There has not been consistent and effective action taken in respect of safeguarding incidents.
- Risk assessments and safer-caring practice are generic and weak.
- Management monitoring of the quality of care provided to children and young people is not yet fully functional, and therefore cannot reliably inform managers of children and young people's progress.
- Children and young people's case files do not contain the statutory documentation needed to ensure that the agency is meeting the aims and objectives of the placing authority's care plan.
- Staff have had a period of 12 months when training and development opportunities have not been provided by the agency.
- Managers do not consistently seek the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people.

The independent fostering agency's strengths

- Children and young people are making good progress in their foster placements.
- Children and young people say that they are happy living with their foster carers
- Children and young people enjoy enduring placements.
- Foster carers feel supported by the agency and speak positively about the training that they receive.
- Leaders and managers are aware of the shortfalls and have implemented an action plan clearly detailing the improvements that are required.

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
The fostering service provider must compile a written statement in relation to the fostering service ("the statement of purpose") and subject to paragraph (6), the fostering service provider must ensure that the fostering service is at all times conducted in a manner which is consistent with its statement of purpose. (Regulation 3 (5))	31/07/2017
The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11 (1) (a))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which provides in particular for the prompt referral to the area authority of any allegation of abuse or neglect affecting any child placed by the fostering service provider. (Regulation 12 (3) (b))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which provides in particular for consideration to be given to the measures which may be necessary to protect children placed with foster parents following an allegation of abuse or neglect. (Regulation 12 (3) (e))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that no child placed with a foster parent is subject to any measure of control, restraint or discipline which is excessive or unreasonable. (Regulation 13 (2) (b))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must ensure that each child is provided with guidance, support and advice on health, personal care and health promotion issues appropriate to the child's needs and wishes, with particular reference to sexual health. (Regulation 15 (2) (d))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must implement a procedure for monitoring the educational achievement, progress and school attendance of children placed with foster parents. (Regulation 16 (2) (a))	31/07/2017
The fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to	31/07/2017

<p>date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6 (3) (d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must ensure that all persons employed by them receive appropriate training. (Regulation 21 (4) (a))</p>	<p>31/07/2017</p>

Recommendations

- Ensure that children communicate their views on all aspects of their care and support. (NMS 1.3)
- Ensure that all foster carers receive training in positive care and control of children, including training in de-escalating problems and disputes. The fostering service has a clear written policy on managing behaviour, which includes supporting positive behaviour, de-escalation of conflicts and discipline. The fostering service's policy is made clear to the responsible authority/placing authority, child and parent/s or carers before the placement begins or, in an emergency placement, at the time of the placement. (NMS 3.8)
- Ensure that foster carers are trained in appropriate safer-care practice, including skills to care for children who have been abused. (NMS 4.6)
- Ensure that the written report on the person's suitability to be approved as a foster carer sets out clearly all the information that the fostering panel and decision-maker needs in order to make an objective approval decision. The reports are accurate, up-to-date and include evidence based information that distinguishes between fact, opinion and third party information. The reports are prepared, signed and dated by the social worker who assessed the prospective foster carer and countersigned and dated by the fostering team manager or a team manager of another of the provider's fostering teams. (NMS 13.7)
- 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. (NMS 14.7)
- 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. (NMS 26.6)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: requires improvement to be good

The agency is successful in providing stable placements for many children who need them. This includes keeping brothers and sisters together, children and young people who have complex needs and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A strength of the agency is the work undertaken to ensure a good match between children, young people and their carers. Information sharing at this point is good, enabling placements to start in a positive way. A placing social worker, stated, 'The carers make [young person] feel part of the family.' A young person stated, 'I intend to stay with my carer until I am 66.' However, the agency does not ensure that all foster carers and supervising social workers have full, up-to-date and satisfactory information after the placement is made, such as care plans, personal education plans, delegated authority, medical information and children's reviews. This has an impact on the foster carer's ability to deliver safe, effective and individualised care for children and young people.

When possible, children and young people have the opportunity to visit their foster carers prior to moving in. When this is not possible, children and young people are provided with 'foster carer profiles' that include photographs of their home, family, pets and their bedroom. This enables them to have some understanding and knowledge of their new home and alleviates some of their anxieties. However, consultation with children and young people is an area for development. The agency does not consistently seek their views, wishes and feelings about the support and quality of care that they receive. This means that children and young people are not involved in the development of the service.

Foster carers feel supported by their supervising social worker and the wider agency. A foster carer who is adopting the foster children who live with her said, 'We have fostered with National Fostering Agency (NFA) for six years... the training is fantastic, as is the trainer... everybody [in NFA] is so supportive and excited for us all in adopting the children.' Another foster carer feels supported, stating, 'I get support any time, day or night, training is very good and payments are on time... I am very happy with NFA and have no concerns.' Children and young people feel confident with their foster carers. One family of children had strong and positive relationships with their foster carers. A young person said, 'My foster carer is the very best carer in the world. She is very kind and helpful. She is amazing and she makes amazing soups.'

The implementation of behaviour management policies and safer-caring has been lacking for some carers. Supervising social workers' supervision notes do not show a clear plan to deliver the recommendations for specific training in behaviour management and de-escalation techniques. The agency is now providing foster carers with opportunities to develop and improve their knowledge, understanding and skills to care for the children and young people who live with them. However, some carers' lack of attendance on training courses has been an area of challenge for the agency. Supervising social workers have started to raise training needs with the foster carers during their monthly supervision meetings. The current level of success for foster carers achieving the training and development standards within 12 months of approval is only 79%. This is an area of continuing development to ensure that foster carers continually

develop and are equipped to meet the needs of vulnerable children and to keep them safe.

The progress and experience that children and young people make in areas such as education and health is positive, despite carers not having the appropriate paperwork. Foster carers value healthy lifestyles and promote exercise and balanced diets. Children and young people who have learning and physical disabilities live with foster carers who advocate for them and make sure that they have the right equipment and resources. However, there have been occasions when young people have not received adequate support in respect of their sexual health.

Education is promoted and overall young people do attend school or an alternative educational provision. Children and young people do make progress from their starting points. However, school reports and achievements in education are not currently monitored or celebrated by the agency. Children and young people are able to pursue their interests, which may be related to their future careers, or recreational activities. They are provided with opportunities to develop interests and to take part in activities such as regular clubs. This helps them to develop self-confidence and to learn social skills.

Foster carers promote and support children and young people to see their families when it is safe to do so. One foster carer bought the children's birth mother Christmas presents for her to give to her children. This gesture made the children feel very happy. Consequently, children and young people receive effective support to stay in touch with significant people and sustain their family identity.

How well children and young people are helped and protected: requires improvement to be good

Communication about safeguarding issues has not been consistently good enough, and on some occasions has left children and young people at risk. On the majority of occasions, the agency has acted robustly and taken effective action, such as when a child was subjected to an excessive and unreasonable method of control by the foster carer. The child was moved to a place of safety and safeguarding investigations were swiftly undertaken. However, the agency has failed to ensure that all children and young people are safeguarded. They have not followed their safeguarding procedures when there are concerns regarding a foster carer's conduct. There has been no referral to relevant safeguarding professionals. On another occasion, staff did not ensure that a safeguarding incident was satisfactorily concluded and that all actions were completed following safeguarding meetings. This means that children and young people's safety could be further compromised.

Risk assessments are not always clear and robust. Generic risk assessments and safer-caring plans do not provide foster carers with strategies to keep children and young people safe. For example, risk assessments are poor and some unsuitable language is used in respect of mental health and disabilities. Some risk assessments are incomplete and do not identify strategies to minimise identified risks. For example, children sharing bedrooms. This leaves children and young people vulnerable to further safeguarding incidents.

The agency does not always have sufficient documentation to create a clear and robust care plan in respect of parent and child placements. There is insufficient detail about

whether, or how, the foster carers will look after the baby. Planning does not secure agreement about responsibilities or essential aspects of the placement. Consequently, the parent and child may not get the support that they need.

Foster carers are supervised on a regular basis and feel well supported. However, the supervision records do not reflect positive and supportive dialogue with carers to promote children and young people's welfare. On occasions, important referrals in respect of child sexual exploitation and radicalisation have not been made. As a result, some young people's safety and welfare have not been promoted. There are few instances of young people going missing from foster care. The agency has a protocol in place to ensure that procedures are followed quickly. When such incidents occur, appropriate safeguarding measures are undertaken, including a 'return to home interview'.

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

There have been several changes in managers since the last inspection. The new registered manager (overseen by the responsible individual and senior managers) has a clear action plan to implement improvements in the agency. The registered manager is suitably qualified and experienced and he works well with other professionals. The agency has experienced a period of instability with staffing. There has been a high turnover of fostering staff within the office. All posts are now filled and the agency has worked hard to try to provide foster carers and children with consistency. Supervising social workers and foster carers feel well supported by the leaders and managers. They find managers accessible and they feel that the agency is 'going in the right direction' following a period of instability due to a change of managers. The registered manager is always available to provide support and guidance to foster carers and supervising social workers.

Management oversight in some areas is inconsistent. Managers have only recently started to track the progress of the children and young people to ensure that staff have the correct paperwork to meet the aims and objectives of the individual placements. The agency's electronic recording systems are able to identify how many children and young people have an up-to-date local authority plan, including delegated authority, or the most recent looked after child in care review. However, managers and staff have not acted swiftly to seek this information from placing local authorities. For example, some supervising social workers only have 19% or 33% of care plans for the children or young people who live with their foster carers. The lack of documentation and poor monitoring means that managers are not able to monitor the progress that children and young people are making or to evaluate the quality of care provided by foster carers.

The agency's systems for gathering data are inefficient, as they do not always gather all of the information or document it appropriately. For example, the agency does not comprehensively monitor children and young people's education or health outcomes. There is a lack of analysis of data and what this means for the agency. Internal or external scrutiny is not used for qualitative analysis. Consequently, the agency does not use accurate data to drive forward improvement within its service.

The fostering panel is quorate, is independently chaired and has a diverse and experienced membership. However, the quality assurance of foster carers' assessments is weak. The assessments are not rigorous and do not explore potential carers'

parenting skills in any depth. Furthermore, inconsistency in paperwork reflects poor assessing skills. Senior managers have already identified this as an area of weakness. They are implementing alternative arrangements that will ensure robust, analytical and comprehensive fostering assessment reports in the future. Panel minutes lack clarity as to how decisions are made. The decision-maker confirmed during the inspection that she seeks additional information in order to make a safe decision. This is not reflected in the recordings. As a result, some areas for further improvement relate to the quality of the agency's documentation to evidence its good practice. Panel minutes, and the discussions for recommendations about foster carers' suitability, do not always reflect the detail of discussion and deliberation, and so may not provide the best information to the decision-maker on which to base her decision. Consequently, some significant information may be lost.

Fostering staff are child-focused and keen to improve the service. They feel supported and receive regular supervision. However, there has been no formal staff learning or development in a 12-month period. Their professional development and training does not yet have the focus that the agency gives to foster carers.

The registered manager has oversight of the agency's operation and the areas for development, and he is fully aware of the majority of the shortfalls. The registered manager and senior managers have a commitment to a programme of improvement. However, action to meet some regulatory shortfalls from the last inspection is not yet effective. A development plan outlines the direction of travel to improve the quality of care and safeguarding. Consequently, managers are not ensuring that they are fulfilling the aims and objectives set out within the statement of purpose.

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: SC470279

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