

National Fostering Agency

The National Fostering Agency Limited
71 Cowley Road, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 2AE
Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The National Fostering Agency is an independent fostering agency that operates on a national basis. This inspection relates to the work carried out by the south east, south west and London regions from their office based in Uxbridge. The agency provides a wide range of fostering placements including emergency, short-term, long-term, bridging and parent and child placements. Within its range of fostering services, the agency includes the placement of unaccompanied young people seeking asylum and children with special needs. At the time of this inspection, the agency provided for 757 children in 565 fostering households.

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 July 2018

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: 12 October 2015

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Key findings from this inspection

This independent fostering agency is outstanding because:

- From their starting points, many children make outstanding progress in all areas of their lives.
- Foster carers are skilled and experienced and are able to offer high-quality placements that meet the diverse needs of children. They demonstrate an excellent understanding of the needs of children placed with them and feel very much part of a team.
- Stable and secure placements are underpinned by exceptionally supportive carers who promote emotional resilience and practical support. This means that children understand how to stay safe, and episodes of going missing are low.
- Children receive excellent educational support from their foster carers and the agency. As a result, children's educational achievements exceed the national average in many areas.
- Children's participation is an outstanding strength of the agency. Children are encouraged to contribute their views and to be involved in the development of the agency in a variety of ways. These include the recruitment of a children's ambassador, various activities, and discussions with agency social workers and senior managers.
- A high number of children remain with their foster carers under the staying put scheme. This provides children with additional familial support while moving on to higher education, and stability during their transition to adulthood.
- Research informs practice in this agency to a very high level. Managers support and lead innovative and creative practice together with specialist services to support carers and improve the excellent care given to children. These have been fundamental to the success of placements.
- The excellent records maintained by the agency and foster carers provide a comprehensive overview of each child's journey in the care system. This includes the development of welcome boxes for each child at the start of the placement. These evolve into life story boxes, giving the child a good understanding of their care experiences.
- The fostering panel provides strong oversight. This results in an agency with highly competent and skilled carers, motivated to provide the highest standard of care to children.

The independent fostering agency's areas for development:

- Minutes from the fostering panel should include full and clear details of the issues, discussions and recommendations made at panel. A small number of minutes considered during this inspection did not contain sufficient information.
- Notifications to Ofsted should be made in a timely manner and, where necessary, updates following investigation should be received.

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

Recommendations

- The panel chair ensures 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 recommendations. (National Minimum Standards 14.7)
- A written record is kept which includes details of the action taken, and the outcome of any action or investigation, following the event. (National Minimum Standards 29.2)

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: outstanding

This outstanding fostering agency provides an excellent quality of service to its foster carers, and the children and young people they look after. Consequently, it achieves outcomes for children and young people that transform their lives. This is illustrated in a poem written by a young person: 'The time has come to show other flowers... that a flower can grow in concrete and still blossom beautifully.' This is the ethos of the young people's forum.

Young people who spoke to inspectors during the inspection were extremely positive about the care and support that they receive.

Notable comments by children and young people were:

- 'I have not had the chance to tell everybody about my foster mum, she is an amazing independent, strong woman who inspires me to achieve and be the best I can be.'
- 'My home is a welcoming place where you are accepted, no matter where you are from. It is fun and exciting.'

Children quickly form strong attachments with foster carers and make outstanding progress, which is creatively recorded in their personalised monthly photographs and life storybooks. Young people readily spoke of the care and devotion shown by their foster carers. One young person spoke of her delight after being taken to the Caribbean to meet her extended family. Children make significant progress from their starting points. Examples of this include: children are now in stable placements, having previously experienced numerous placement breakdowns due to non-engagement with carers and professionals; children improve their ability to understand how to stay safe, and they re-engage in education. Certificates, awards and pictures reflect how children are making significant progress in all areas of their lives.

The agency uses specific models of therapeutic care to deliver support to foster carers. A trained dyadic developmental psychotherapist helps carers to understand how children who have experienced trauma and show development and attachment difficulties use behaviour as a means of communication. Playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy are also used to create emotional safety for children. Both methods of intervention help foster carers to reflect on their own experiences to enable conscious and empathic support to children. This helps to ensure that all work with young people is focused on helping to meet their individual needs in a holistic way. The impressive focus of the agency on the needs of children and foster carers facilitates highly stable and beneficial placements, which help young people to develop good relationships and grow in confidence and self-esteem.

The educational progress of children is an outstanding strength of this agency. An education champion helps foster carers and social workers to support children's educational attendance, progress and achievement. This has resulted in 97% of all

children and young people placed by the agency attending mainstream education or an alternative education or training provision that meets their individual emotional and educational needs. Regular school attendance is at 98.2% and is significantly higher than the national average for children in care.

Overall, children placed with this agency achieve better educational outcomes than the national average for children in care, with a significant number attending further education. The agency's lead education specialist puts these outstanding achievements down to the strength of the agency in creating stability for young people, and the commitment, passion and collaborative work of foster carers and agency social workers who believe that 'only the best is good enough for their children'.

Young people are encouraged to participate in activities to support their physical and emotional well-being. A foster carer said, 'We have a sibling group of three who could not be engaged in anything. The introduction of the choir and dance group was the first time they showed interest in anything. Because of the groups, the children are engaged in dance and song; this has resulted in constructive conversations in the home and a vast reduction in negative behaviours.' This is an agency where staff readily go over and above to support the emotional well-being of children and to support foster carers to flourish in their role. Young people's individual achievements and progress, however small, are celebrated openly and enthusiastically.

Children benefit from improved physical and emotional health. Foster carers work closely with specialist medical teams, such as sexual health clinics, diabetic nurses and child and adolescent mental health services. This expert guidance helps foster carers to understand and respond to children's wide-ranging health needs.

Children's participation is an exceptional strength of the agency. Children are encouraged to contribute their views and to be involved in the development of the agency in a variety of ways, including the young people's forum, the introduction of a young people's portal, and a monthly magazine with separate editions for different age groups containing articles of current interest, often written by young people. More recently, the recruitment of a young people's ambassador is further evidence of managers' commitment to 'the voice of the child'. The ambassador's role is to act as the voice of young people to influence the agency's policies and procedures.

The agency is committed to delivering exceptionally high standards of care for young people through secure and stable foster placements where they can successfully develop into responsible, mature adults.

Long-term planning and permanency are key strengths of the agency. Several young people have remained living with their foster families under 'staying put' arrangements beyond 18 years of age. Additionally, almost half of the children placed are with fostering families on a long-term basis. Similarly, the agency has successfully recruited foster carers who can provide family groups of brothers and sisters with long-term placements. The agency also supports young children to remain living with their parents by providing high-quality 'parent and child' placements.

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

The agency prioritises the need to keep young people safe and to protect them from harm. A positive sense of safeguarding permeates the strategic and operational functions of the organisation. There are well-established processes for senior management to monitor safeguarding practices across the agency. Forums such as safeguarding and compliance boards monitor the data provided through internal and external audits and use this to improve practice. In addition, the safeguarding board analyses national trends and areas of good practice, taking into account the learning from any relevant serious case reviews. This learning informs practice development across the organisation.

Local authority commissioning teams are very positive about the agency's safeguarding practice. One commissioner said, 'I have conducted the last two annual reviews for this agency, where we have the largest number of children placed. I have found practice to be outstanding. Safeguarding practice generally is extremely strong and it is evident that children feel safe and well supported in placement.'

Another commissioner stated, 'The agency takes on some of our more challenging placements. The local authority reviewed the training that is offered to both foster carers and social workers and found that it is of an excellent quality and comprehensive enough to equip them with the skills to adequately support care plans and keep children safe. Foster carers demonstrate a high level of understanding of the key risk factors that children are vulnerable to. The agency has been proactive in linking our child sexual exploitation coordinator to the forum for professionals.'

Local authority safeguarding officers confirmed that the agency has excellent safeguarding practices in place and acts promptly in a transparent manner when there are any concerns.

Children who spoke to inspectors all reported feeling safe and said that they are able to speak about any concerns or issues with their foster carers. One young person said, 'My home provides me with security, comfort and a safe place away from the streets.' When risks for young people are identified, the agency appropriately works in partnership with the placing authority to secure specialist orders, such as a 'harbouring' notice, to safeguard young people. The effectiveness of these interventions is regularly monitored.

Foster carers report feeling a high level of care, support and investment from the agency. This ranges from a bouquet of flowers at the point of approval to therapeutic support at the conclusion of a placement. Carers spoke of the 'extra touches' provided by the agency, such as well-being days, courses on mindfulness, funded support groups, welcome boxes and the consistent focus of supervising social workers. Foster carers said that their supervising social workers maintained close relationships with both themselves and young people and had excellent insight into placement dynamics. A foster carer commented, 'We are not just paperwork. The agency really values us for the people we are.'

The agency employs support workers who undertake direct work with young people

on areas such as life story work, staying safe and independence planning. Support workers engage with placed young people as well as birth children in a variety of activities and events. They use a range of resources to support young people with any areas of concern or need. They also provide additional support to foster carers, leading to increased placement stability.

Training is highly effective and enables foster carers to understand the messages that young people are communicating through their behaviour. The training also allows them to put that behaviour in the context of previous trauma and attachment issues. Bespoke training and specific one-to-one work are available when necessary to meet the specific support needs of foster carers. Managers are creative and seek to work with other settings, such as universities, to offer guidance on specific issues, such as the needs of transgender placements. Solution-based therapy is one of several therapeutic approaches used. Because of these differing training approaches, foster carers are able to adapt the care and support that they provide to reflect the changing needs of young people.

Foster carers understand the principles of safe care and implement these in practice. This begins at initial placement planning and then into the actual placement itself. Social work staff are particularly effective and creative in ensuring that risk assessments and safe care plans are detailed and provide foster carers with clear guidance on how to meet the individual needs of young people. The staff team consistently reviews documentation through discussions with foster carers and young people to identify any necessary changes concerning behaviour. These reviews enable foster carers to respond to any situations with confidence. Foster carers receive regular supervision and visits, particularly those who look after young people who pose specific challenges. Forward thinking and planning ensure that strategies are in place for preventing behaviours that could lead to placement breakdown.

The agency has an extremely well-considered staff and foster carer recruitment strategy with a strong emphasis on child protection and safeguarding matters. From the point of application, rigorous and effective checks prevent unsuitable people from being recruited or having the opportunity to harm children or place them at risk.

Managers understand the needs of local authorities and young people needing families and have well-developed strategies to meet these needs.

The fostering panel is a strength of the agency. Members are exceptionally skilled and experienced professionals, with strong leadership via the panel chairperson. They provide a detailed analysis of the information obtained from the assessment process of potential applicants and make well-evidenced recommendations. Panel meetings are robust, with sound administrative procedures in place. However, a small number of panel minutes would benefit from more detail on the panel discussions and processes for making recommendations.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: outstanding

Since the last inspection, there has been a change in the registered manager. The

previous registered manager resigned from the post to focus on safeguarding at a national level. Succession planning has been positive and seamless.

The new manager joined the agency in July 2014. She has submitted her application to register with Ofsted and this is currently being progressed. She is a qualified social worker and has substantive experience of working in the fostering field at a senior management level. She demonstrates an excellent knowledge and awareness of the agency's strengths and areas for development. The manager is effective and proactive and has a good knowledge of the young people in placements.

Senior managers are visible to the staff team and transmit a sense of shared ownership throughout the organisation. Leaders and managers have a vision and a real drive and commitment to the continual improvement and development of this outstanding agency. An education specialist said, 'There is exceptionally strong leadership in the agency; staff have excellent ideas and a passion for moving children forward.' Managers are forward thinking in developing innovative new ideas for the service. They act on information from many differing sources, including information received from exit interviews, feedback from the youth ambassador and from foster carers to assess new and creative alternatives for developing the service. Managers actively quality assure each other's work to share expertise and to maintain a consistent high quality of practice.

Staff feel engaged, valued and supported. They report high levels of management support and training. This has resulted in the team being recognised as the 'team of the year' at the summer 2016 national conference by the national organisation. Staff are consistent and highly committed to this agency. Staff feel like a 'family' within the organisation and are enthused by new and exciting initiatives such as a men-in-fostering group, the youth portal and the foster carers' training academy.

The high quality of leadership in the agency is reflected in the excellent practice of the staff team. Supervision and appraisal systems are effective. Staff personal development plans inform training plans that maintain and develop staff skills.

An excellent quality assurance system permeates all aspects of the agency's work and contributes to continuing improvement. The agency has a detailed business plan, setting out realistic but ambitious targets. The service uses effective technology, which contributes to comprehensive monitoring systems that provide staff with up-to-date information and highlight any shortfalls that need addressing. For example, staff can identify any patterns and trends in an individual child's 'missing' behaviour, or whether school attendance and progress have fallen short and individual support is needed. Such systems have a positive impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of keeping children safe and contribute to better evidence recording for children.

Managers consider all complaints promptly and thoroughly. Staff provide excellent support to young people when they have experienced a change in social worker or feel not listened to by their placing authority. Managers raise concerns and advocate strongly with placing authorities, but also ensure that supervising social workers and carers provide continuity and the necessary level of support needed. This reflects a service and staff group that go over and above their roles to ensure that young people's support needs are consistently met.

Research informs the practice of this service and specialist services are key to the success of placements in this agency. There is a genuine sense of care, commitment and professionalism at all levels in the agency. Despite the large size of the agency, it continues to maintain a strong sense of family. The agency continues to grow slowly, yet continues to improve, develop and maintain an outstanding quality of care for children, foster carers and social workers.

The statement of purpose clearly describes the agency's aims and objectives. It is available on the agency's website. The children's guides provide information for young people about being fostered, who they can speak to and how to complain. The guides are accessible to children of different ages and reading ability. This ensures that children and stakeholders are clear in their understanding and expectations of the agency from the start.

Appropriate action has been taken by the agency in relation to all events notified to the regulator. However, not all notifications are made in a timely manner, including the outcome of any action or investigation, following a serious event. This is a minor shortfall and does not impact on the transparent and robust safeguarding practice of the agency.

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 differences 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 whom 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: SC035553

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Limited

Registered provider address: National Fostering Agency, 71 Cowley Road,
Uxbridge UB8 2AE

Responsible individual: Isabelle Hutchison

Registered manager: Post vacant

Telephone number: 01895 200 300

Email address: Tashaye@nfa.co.uk

Inspector(s)

Juanita Mayers, social care inspector
Barnaby Dowell, social care inspector



The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence>, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at <http://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted>.

Interested in our work? You can subscribe to our monthly newsletter for more information and updates: <http://eepurl.com/iTrDn>.

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: <http://www.gov.uk/ofsted>

© Crown copyright 2018