

National Fostering Agency London North

The National Fostering Agency Limited

Waterside House, 20 Riverside Way, Uxbridge UB8 2YF

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency registered in June 2022. It is based in the London Borough of Hillingdon and operates mainly in North London. The agency provides a full range of fostering placements to children, including emergency, respite, short-term, long-term, and parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, there were 144 approved fostering households, caring for 163 children. Almost 30% of the children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Twenty-five young adults were also living with their foster carers under a staying-put arrangement.

The manager registered in June 2022. She is a qualified social worker and is working towards the required management qualification.

This was the agency's first inspection.

During this inspection, the inspectors were aware that a child protection investigation was underway by the appropriate authorities. While Ofsted does not have the power to investigate incidents of this kind, actions taken by the setting in response to the safeguarding concerns were considered (where appropriate) alongside other evidence available at the time of the inspection to inform the inspectors' judgements.

Inspection dates: 28 November to 2 December 2022

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	inadequate

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

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

Children's overall experiences and progress are variable. Although many children benefit from stability and being part of a family, some children have experienced unplanned endings. This was often following allegations and concerns about the standard of care that they received. For these children, stability, permanency and progress had been significantly undermined.

During this inspection, we found that the children's guide is not consistently available in different languages. This means that it is not accessible to children who do not speak English. Additionally, the contact details of the Children's Commissioner for England are not included in the children's guide.

Supervising social workers regularly seek the views of children when they undertake visits to the foster carer's home. Many children engage with the agency's consultations and have provided some positive feedback about their safety, education, health and activities.

Foster carers encourage and support children to attend education and engage. The foster carers and agency work closely with local authorities and schools to address any barriers to children's education. As a result, most children do well at school and make progress.

Children have opportunities to take part in a wide range of activities and pursue their interests and hobbies, such as reading, drama, boxing, basketball and swimming. Children and foster carers are proud of these achievements, which increase children's confidence, self-esteem and overall health and well-being.

Children's social workers talk positively about the agency's joint working and the nurturing care that many foster carers provide.

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

Children do not consistently receive a good standard of help and protection. The agency does not share safeguarding concerns with other relevant agencies swiftly enough. On one occasion, serious concerns were not shared with the local authority designated officer in a timely manner. This caused a delay in getting the concerns investigated, which compromised the child's welfare and safety.

Not all risk assessments and safer caring plans are personalised to the children's individual needs. Some potential and known risks to children, including going missing from home, criminal exploitation and substance misuse, are not being thoroughly assessed. Weaknesses in the assessment and management of risk are undermining safeguarding practice and children's safety.

The agency promotes a trauma-informed approach to behaviour management. Foster carers understand how children's adverse early childhood experiences impact on their emotional well-being and behaviour. In the main, foster carers support children to deal with difficult emotions, which helps them to improve their behaviour and safety.

The supervising social workers' regular visits to foster carers' homes, which include unannounced visits, enhance children's safety.

The agency provides opportunities for staff and foster carers to discuss and reflect on safeguarding concerns, such as child criminal exploitation. This is helping them to develop a better understanding and response to risk.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: inadequate

The registered manager is new to this role and is supported by a principal social worker, two team managers and an experienced senior leadership team. Although the agency is ambitious for children, some significant shortfalls in leadership and management are compromising the quality of care and protection provided to children.

The required protocols for transferring foster carers to this agency have not been followed consistently. Some foster carers were presented to the agency's panel for approval before the agency was registered. This raises questions about the leaders and managers' understanding of the legal processes when transferring carers from other agencies.

Not all staff feel settled or committed to the agency and staff morale is low. Some staff said that they feel undervalued and excluded from decision-making. Some experienced staff have left the agency and others said that they plan to leave.

Leaders and managers do not ensure that information-sharing between the team is effective, particularly when staff leave and other staff take over their work. For example, some staff were unable to answer questions at the fostering panel. This does not demonstrate strong team working.

The manager's oversight of the day-to-day operations of the agency is limited. Inconsistencies in how and where staff record information hinders the manager's monitoring. As a result, the manager's monitoring reports are not always accurate.

Staff do not find that the training available is consistently meeting their needs. Similarly, foster carers' training is limited in terms of what is offered, and some carers' training attendance is poor. For example, only 44% of foster carers have completed paediatric first aid, and 59% have completed training on de-escalating behaviour. Furthermore, the agency does not provide any training to foster carers on caring for UASC.

The agency does not always send notifications to Ofsted in a timely manner, and some notifications do not provide all required information, such as the information about the child or the child's placing authority. Delayed and incomplete notifications undermine Ofsted's oversight of significant events.

The agency's panel and the decision-maker are effective gatekeepers for the agency. They make positive contributions towards quality assurance by identifying gaps and driving improvement. They defer cases until additional relevant information is established and the reports are of a good standard.

Despite the changes in the supervising social workers, foster carers talk positively about the support that they receive from the agency. Many foster carers are experienced, skilled, resilient and self-reliant.

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
<p>The registered provider and the registered manager must, having regard to—</p> <p>the size of the fostering agency, its statement of purpose, and the numbers and needs of the children placed by the fostering agency, and</p> <p>the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children placed by the fostering agency,</p> <p>carry on or manage the fostering agency (as the case may be) with sufficient care, competence and skill. (Regulation 8 (1)(a)(b))</p> <p>This relates to ensuring that transfer protocols are consistently followed when transferring foster carers to this agency.</p>	20 January 2023
<p>The registered person in respect of an independent fostering agency must ensure that—</p> <p>the welfare of children placed or to be placed with foster parents is safeguarded and promoted at all times. (Regulation 11(A))</p> <p>This relates to ensuring that the risk assessments and safety plans are personalised to the children's needs, accurately assess the risks to children's safety, and include effective strategies for reducing risk.</p>	20 January 2023
<p>The fostering service provider must prepare and implement a written policy which—</p> <p>is intended to safeguard children placed with foster parents from abuse or neglect, and</p>	20 January 2023

<p>sets out the procedure to be followed in the event of any allegation of abuse or neglect.</p> <p>The procedure under paragraph (1)(b) must provide in particular for—</p> <p>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 (1)(a)(b) (3)(b))</p>	
<p>The fostering service provider must provide foster parents with such training, as appears necessary in the interests of children placed with them.</p> <p>The fostering service provider must take all reasonable steps to ensure that foster parents are familiar with, and act in accordance with the policies established in accordance with regulations 12(1) and 13(1) and (3). (Regulation 17(1) (2))</p>	20 January 2023
<p>The registered person must maintain a system for—</p> <p>monitoring the matters set out in Schedule 6 at appropriate intervals. (Regulation 35 (1)(a))</p>	20 January 2023

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the agency's children's guide includes information about the Children's Commissioner for England. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 16.4)
- The registered person should ensure that the agency's children's guide is made available to children in the language and the form of communication that they can access. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 16.6)

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences and progress of children and young people using the social care common inspection framework. This inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service, how it meets the core functions of the service as set out in legislation, and to consider how well it complies with the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 and the national minimum standards.

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 2677721

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Claire Beckingham, His Majesty's Inspector, Social Care

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