

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 a registered branch of the National Fostering Agency. This private company operates throughout England, Wales and Scotland. The regional office is based in Lowestoft and is registered to cover a geographical area that 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 419 children by supporting and monitoring 326 approved fostering households.

The registered manager has been registered since August 2017.

Inspection dates: 13 to 17 May 2019

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 **good**

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

Date of last inspection: 24 April 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: good

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Children experience a strong sense of belonging. They form lasting bonds with their foster carers and their foster carers' extended families. Many children benefit from the stability and security of long-term placements. A number of children live with their own brothers and sisters. A small number of young adults 'stay put' with their foster carers when they reach 18 years. The longevity and success of these placements help children to flourish and to reach their potential.

Foster carers understand the implications of children's attachment and their past experiences. Carers routinely 'go above and beyond' to help and support children and champion those for whom they care.

Children benefit from visits to their families and extended families when this reflects the local authority plan. These visits help to ensure that children retain their identity and that their unique worth is valued.

Children are actively encouraged to develop their individual talents and interests. Children's physical health improves. Foster carers receive consistent help, guidance and advice to recognise and respond when individual children require extra support. Children's emotional well-being and mental health improve because they routinely have access to a range of adults who know how to help them.

The agency actively promotes the importance of good education. Professional relationships with virtual school headteachers ensure that children attend and participate in education that meets their individual needs. Communication with children's local authority social workers is good. The feedback from local authority social workers was unanimously positive and identified the significant progress that their child is making.

Children's self-esteem and confidence grow. One child said, 'Being with my foster carer provides me with opportunities that I just would not have had.'

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

Good-quality matching that is overseen by allocated supervising social workers and their managers helps to reduce the likelihood of unplanned endings and unnecessary moves. This provides children with increased stability.

There is a clear expectation from the wider agency that supervising social workers make the time to come to know all children living in the household. This sets the scene to ensure that supervising social workers act to address or escalate any individual concerns or worries.

Children feel safe and can readily identify a trusted adult to turn to. The agency has a range of embedded systems to ensure that children's voices are heard. For

example, children routinely contribute to their foster carers' annual review. In addition, the agency is rolling out an app to improve arrangements for engaging with children.

A dedicated workforce provides foster carers with early help and consistent support at any hour of the day or night. Foster carers learn to understand the children's complex behaviours and help them to build resilience. Children develop the skill and ability to make good and safe decisions. The known risks to individual children decrease over time. Children who were known to go missing from previous settings reduce this behaviour.

Allegations and complaints about foster carers have increased. Further analysis shows that this is because the agency takes a comprehensive approach to address any concerns effectively. Allegations are referred to the designated officer. When necessary, carers' continuing suitability is reviewed by the fostering panel. The foster carers have access to good independent support.

Adept screening and initial assessment help to ensure the approval of high-calibre foster carers. The professionally diverse foster panels demonstrate curiosity and tenacity in unpicking any potential concerns. This ensures considered recommendations to the experienced and knowledgeable agency decision-makers.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The registered manager has been in post since before the last inspection. She is a qualified social worker with significant experience of working in social care. She provides good continuity and stability for the children, the carers and the staff. The registered manager is supported and assisted by a team of proficient managers and senior managers. This structure helps to ensure appropriate oversight of daily operations.

There has been a change of responsible individual. The new arrangements reflect the wider agency's progress towards taking responsibility for the geographical spread of this large registration. Ofsted has received an application for the new office base in West Yorkshire from the staff seeking to register.

Competent, professional and child-centred supervising social workers receive regular supervision, support and guidance. Line managers are consistently available to their staff team. This ensures an effective focus on responding to placement issues as they arise.

Foster carers' groups are an established and embedded network of support. The managers have increased the scope and choice of groups available for foster carers and children to attend. This proactive approach helps to increase participation and engagement.

The agency has a plethora of informative and stimulating courses available. The foster carers benefit from direct contact with training providers and online courses. Foster carers who regularly attend training spoke highly of the content. However,

some foster carers are resistant to training. The agency has recently taken some steps to address this, in individual circumstances. Despite this, the approach is inconsistent and does not ensure that the hard-to-reach foster carers meet the training requirements relevant to the children in their care.

The monitoring of written records is flawed in places, because electronic systems have examples of information that is repeated word for word, despite referencing different dates. This recording fails to ensure that information captured on foster carers' and children's files is relevant and reflective of their current experiences.

The significant contribution of individual foster carers' skill and commitment is valued. The 'everyday heroes award' recognises members of the fostering community who act selflessly to prioritise the needs of the children in care.

Leaders and managers meet with foster carers to seek their views about the agency and how to make improvements. Foster carers said that their experience of the agency is that it consistently does what it says it will do – that is, to find loving foster families for children.

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

Recommendations

- Ensure the implementation of clear and effective procedures for monitoring and controlling the activities of the service. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards, 25.1)

In particular, monitor the content of information in the foster carers' and children's case files.

- Ensure that support and training are made available to foster carers, including hard-to-reach carers, to assist them in meeting the specific needs of the children they are caring for or are expected to care for. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

In particular, ensure a purposeful approach to delivery of training for foster carers who are hard to reach.

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: SC038843

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