

National Fostering Agency North

Elant House Unit A3, Old Power Way, Lowfields Business Park, Elland, Yorkshire HX5 9DE

Assurance visit

Information about this independent fostering agency

This independent fostering agency has been registered since 1 September 2019. The manager was registered on the same date. The service operates from a registered office in West Yorkshire and covers a large geographical area, which includes Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. The agency offers a range of foster placements, including respite, permanent, long-term, short-term, and parent and child arrangements. At the time of this visit, the agency had 172 fostering households who are caring for 294 children and young people.

Visit dates: 17 to 18 December 2020

Previous inspection date: Not previously inspected

Previous inspection judgement: Not previously inspected

Information about this visit

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), Ofsted suspended all routine inspections in March 2020. As part of a phased return to routine inspection, we are undertaking assurance visits to children's social care services that are inspected under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF).

At these visits, inspectors evaluate the extent to which:

- children are well cared for
- children are safe
- leaders and managers are exercising strong leadership.

This visit was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000, following the published guidance for assurance visits.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings from the visit

We did not identify any serious or widespread concerns in relation to the care or protection of children at this assurance visit.

The care of children

There is good matching of children with their carers. Supervising social workers know their carers well, which helps when making decisions about placing children. The support provided by supervising social workers helps maintain the stability of placements. One carer said, 'They spend time with the children and talk through the little things with us. It's a huge thing, as a little support at the right time reduces escalation of issues.'

During the COVID-19 national lockdown, supervising social workers suspended face-to-face contact with the carers and children. As soon as restrictions lifted, staff completed home visits and unannounced visits to the children. This ensured that children continue to receive good-quality care.

Education has been varied for the children. During the pandemic lockdown, some continued to attend school or college, whereas others were not able to go due to the restrictions. If schools are not proactive in providing homework, then supervising social workers, with the help of the education team, challenge the placing authorities on behalf of the children. This makes sure that children receive the educational provision they should in a timely way.

Child participation is a strong feature of the agency. Support workers have been working hard over the lockdown period to maintain regular contact with the children. Although the normal celebrations, such as annual parties and outings, have not taken place, the support workers have continued to arrange virtual events. This makes sure that children still feel part of the agency.

Supervising social workers have provided foster carers with a multitude of information on how to entertain the children. This has included educational and therapeutic tools for them to use. As a result, children have remained settled during the lockdown period.

The agency send children certificates such as the 'Stay at Home Hero', 'Achievement of the Month', or 'Citizenship Award' for their achievements and community work during the pandemic. The quarterly newsletter, produced by staff with the help of the children, illustrates the number of activities and things the children have been doing over the lockdown period. This demonstrates the hard work of their carers in keeping children entertained.

Children maintain family time with parents and others who are important to them, making use of videoconferencing when restrictions were in place. Individual risk assessments make sure that as soon as it is safe to do so, face-to-face visits take place.

The safety of children

Fostering panels have continued to meet at the same frequency and quoracy during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. These meetings take place by videoconferencing, and the panel process is a robust one. The panel chair and members are thorough in their exploration of the assessing social worker's report. Feedback is provided to the manager about the quality of the foster carers' reports, which leads to better quality, detailed and evaluative reports.

The panel minutes are detailed to enable the experienced agency decision maker to make a decision with full clarity of information regarding the safe approval of foster carers.

During the pandemic, support workers continue to provide one-to-one emotional support to some of the children. This has been important at a time when some external therapeutic services have been suspended. Children have the opportunity to explore their anxieties, including their worries about the pandemic. This helps to educate children as well as reduce their fears. One child said, 'At first I didn't know what would happen if I got COVID. It helped talking, and I listened to the news with my carers.'

When there are concerns about children's risk-taking behaviours, such as an increase in missing from home episodes, the manager attends meetings of professionals. This provides a multi-agency approach to risk management. The children have safer care plans, which are reviewed and updated. These provide strategies for the carers to help better protect children.

The agency notifies Ofsted of any significant events. The manager challenges placing authorities if they do not follow the correct safeguarding procedures. This makes sure a full and proper investigation is undertaken so that children know their complaints or allegations are taken seriously.

Leaders and managers

The agency was formed when two agencies merged together. The manager has effectively dealt with the transfer of the foster carers to one agency. The foster carers enjoy working for the agency, and one said, 'We found the transition smooth with no disruptions at all.'

The manager has focused on developing a coherent staff team that talks positively about its enthusiastic and committed manager. There is more stability within the staff teams, and foster carers enjoy the consistency of support from their supervising social workers.

Foster carers talk of having ample training opportunities. Carers have had virtual training as a result of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Some say they have missed meeting with others for training. However, others say that the

chance to meet virtually with other carers from all parts of the country brings extra benefits.

Foster carers continue to stay in contact with other carers. This includes a group specifically for men to meet virtually. Feedback from carers about the agency include 'fantastic', 'excellent' and 'incredible'. One carer said, 'I feel not just part of a team now but part of an extended family.'

Independent fostering agency details

Unique reference number: 2533109

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Ltd

Registered provider address: Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Responsible individual: John Keane

Registered manager: Andrea Grantham

Inspector

Tina Ruffles, Social Care Inspector

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