

National Fostering Agency North

The National Fostering Agency Limited

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

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

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 has 314 foster carers in 174 fostering households who are caring for 291 children and young people.

Due to COVID-19 (coronavirus), at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers on 17 March 2020.

Inspection dates: 26 to 30 July 2021

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: not applicable

Overall judgement at last inspection: not applicable

Enforcement action since last inspection: not applicable

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Most children have positive experiences of living with their fostering families. They are happy and feel treated as valued members of the family.

Foster carers have built secure and trusting relationships with the children. Some children have lived with their foster families for many years, which reinforces their sense of safety and belonging. The care and nurture that foster carers give the children help them to thrive. One child said, 'I like where I am living. I am getting a lot of attention. My siblings like it too, this is our permanent place.'

Of the 291 children who live with foster carers, 97 are matched long term with their foster carers, which provides children with a stable home life. The agency provides foster carers who can provide loving homes to siblings when this is in the children's best interests. Children who have complex and additional needs are provided with exceptionally good care from their foster carers. As a result, children are making good progress.

The agency supports children to 'stay put' with their foster families when they reach adulthood. This provides the children with much needed stability. However, not all children benefit from a clear plan, which has resulted in a lack of shared understanding between the agency and the local authority about one child's future. The escalation to the local authority has been ineffective in securing the child's pathway plan. Managers are aware of this and have plans to formalise the escalation policy to ensure consistent practice. This will assist the agency in securing the information that they need for the child.

The advice and support provided by the agency, such as regularly supervising social work visits and stability meetings, help foster carers to manage difficult situations. As a result of this support, the number of placement breakdowns and moves for children has reduced.

Children's overall health and emotional well-being is actively promoted with the support from foster carers, primary health, and clinical services. The children's education plans are tailored to meet their individual needs. This helps the children to get the right level of support to help them to reach their goals. The interface between the agency's education lead and schools provides constructive challenge that aims to help the children to overcome any barriers to their learning.

The easing of the restrictions has allowed the children to engage in more activities, and they have excellent opportunities to try something new. One child said, 'We have loads of days out and we do tons of things.'

The strength of children's contact with the agency has been maintained well during the COVID-19 pandemic. The support staff from the agency have worked diligently to remain in touch with the fostering households, for example, running competitions

and inviting families to summer events, sending regular newsletters and resources, and celebrating special events. These personal touches keep the fostering families connected to the agency.

Children's highly impressive and creative talents are celebrated and rewarded by the agency. One foster carer said, 'There are lots of events organised for children throughout the year.'

The time that children spend with their birth family is facilitated by their foster carers. This promotes the children's cultural identity, mental and emotional well-being.

New foster carers comment positively about the timely assessment process and the support from the agency. This includes them joining the carers' support group that has been set up specifically for them. They benefit from having buddies who offer them guidance and support.

The placement social worker oversees effectively the careful matching of children with foster carers, who are fully involved in the matching process. This helps foster carers to make informed choices about their capacity to meet the children's needs.

Foster carers value the support provided by the agency. A foster carer said, 'I am accepted as a professional by the agency and feel part of a team where my opinions are listened to. The children in my care have a good rapport with my supervising social worker and will speak openly to her. I feel the agency on the whole put children and carers first.'

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

Children rate their safety highly. One child said, 'I trust [name of foster carer] and know that she will keep me safe all of the time.' Children can identify trusted adults who they can talk to about their worries and receive appropriate responses.

The children's risks are understood by their foster carers. The foster carers' collaborations with other social care and safeguarding agencies help the children to become increasingly safe. Written risk assessments highlight the areas of support for the child and are updated following concerns, such as the risks linked to exploitation.

Not all of the children are supported to take age-appropriate risks as they reach adulthood. Not all of the safe care plans and risk assessments are up to date to identify all the risks and strategies. The gaps, if left unattended, could expose children to harm.

Allegations against foster carers are managed appropriately by the agency. Prompt referrals and notifications have been made to the relevant organisations, such as the designated officer and Ofsted. The decisive action taken by the agency ensures that unsafe adults are prevented from caring for vulnerable children.

Children do not go missing from home often. When they have gone missing, most foster carers follow the agency's missing-from-care protocol to promote the children's safety. The agency provides a robust response. They complete work with the foster carers and children to help to reduce the risks. Stability meetings are convened if these are required.

On one occasion, a child was not reported missing to the police by their foster carer. There was a concern that the agency's out-of-hours service was not responsive when they were contacted about the missing-from-care incident. The agency has addressed this concern prior to the inspection. The agency cannot evidence that children have been offered an independent return home interview. It is therefore unclear how children are offered a chance to talk about why they ran away, what happened whilst they were away and how they are feeling on their return.

Good support from the agency helps foster carers to manage the children's challenging behaviours and emotional distress. Physical intervention is rarely used. When it has been used, it has not been carried out in line with the approved techniques because foster carers carrying out the intervention have not had the relevant training. This could expose foster carers to allegations of harm.

Health and safety checks at foster carers' homes are completed routinely to ensure that children live in safe environments. Unannounced visits have been increased to twice yearly, which strengthens the safeguards in place for the children.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The resilience of the agency has prevailed during the merger of the two fostering agencies, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the leadership and management of the agency has remained proactive, responsive, and supportive to the staff, foster carers, and children despite the challenging times.

The registered manager and management team are approachable and effective. Managers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the service and they strive for continuous improvement. However, on at least one occasion, the agency did not address a potential standard of care issue with a foster carer in a timely and decisive manner. This delay had the potential to have a negative impact on a child's progress and well-being.

Not all the staff supervision records that are maintained by the agency contain sufficient information about the children's progress. Similarly, not all foster carers' records about the children are written in a child-focused style. Further exploration to help foster carers use alternative ways to record information may help when their time is taken up prioritising the care of children with additional and complex needs.

Recruitment practices are not consistently robust when obtaining relevant references to ensure the safe recruitment of staff.

The agency promotes a safe learning culture that promotes high standards through learning from practice shortfalls so that children can thrive and prosper in loving foster homes. Foster carers speak in complimentary terms about the new online training system. One foster carer said, 'Training is excellent now, it is much improved. The standard is very good, we have done all sorts.' However, despite the positive comments, not all foster carers have up-to-date internet safety training to ensure that they are fully aware of current issues.

The robust independent fostering panel and agency decision-maker roles provide an effective quality assurance process. This supports the recruitment of suitable foster carers. The fostering panel minutes provide a clear appraisal of panel business and this informs the agency decision-makers' deliberations.

Despite this turbulent period due to the merger and the COVID-19 pandemic, most foster carers enjoy fostering for the agency. Some foster carers have experienced several changes of supervising social workers. However, most foster carers have been complimentary despite the changes. One foster carer said that had it not been for the agency merging, they would have resigned. Another foster carer described their supervising social worker as wonderful. 'She is a breath of fresh air, and is supportive.' Another carer said that they have been 'blown away' by the level of support, particularly during the pandemic.

Staff speak positively about working for the agency. They feel supported and supervised regularly by their managers and their practice is appraised. The high caseloads that some supervising social workers hold are mitigated by them having protected workloads.

The diversity agenda is being driven by the agency to ensure that difference is embraced by everyone and promotes seamless all-inclusive practice throughout the agency.

Professionals report very good working relationships and communication with the agency. Local authority commissioners rate the agency highly and refer to the agency as their preferred provider. This shows that they have confidence in the agency's capacity to provide good care and protection to the children that they are responsible for.

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>For the purposes of paragraph (1), a person is not fit to work for the purposes of a fostering service unless that person—</p> <p>is physically and mentally fit for the work they are to perform, and full and satisfactory information is available in relation to that person in respect of each of the matters specified in Schedule 1. (Regulation 20 (3)(c))</p> <p>In particular, ensure that when a person has previously worked in a position where duties involved work with children or vulnerable adults, the registered person should so far as reasonably practicable, verify the reasons why the employment ended.</p>	<p>31 August 2021</p>

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that the written records kept by the fostering service where a child goes missing detail action taken by foster carers, the circumstances of the child's return, any reasons given by the child for running away from the foster home and any action taken in the light of those reasons. This information is shared with the responsible authority and, where appropriate, the child's parents. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 5.10)
- The registered person should ensure that there are comprehensive arrangements for preparing and supporting young people to make the transition to independence. This includes appropriate training and support for foster carers caring for young people who are approaching adulthood. Arrangements are consistent with the young person's care plan, including their placement plan, pathway plan and transition plan for children with disabilities and special educational needs. In particular, escalate the request for a copy of the child's pathway plan from the local authority as a matter of priority. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 12.3)
- The registered person should take action to address any issues of concern that they identify, or which are raised with them. Specifically, ensure that all risk assessments and safe care plans are up to date and identify all of the risks and

strategies. Deliver bespoke training to foster carers in approved methods of physical intervention and internet safety as appropriate. Maintain child-focused foster carer records and consistently explore with foster carers alternative ways to record information. Record the children's progress in the social work staff supervision records. Take timely and decisive action in relation to potential standards of care matters. ('Fostering services: National Minimum Standards', 25.8)

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: 2533109

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Limited

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

Responsible individual: John Keane

Registered manager: Andrea Grantham

Telephone number: 01422 310316

Email address: agrantham@nfa.co.uk

Inspectors

Jacqueline Malcolm, Social Care Inspector

Noel Cooper, 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 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://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>.

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: www.gov.uk/ofsted

© Crown copyright 2021