

National Fostering Agency South West

The National Fostering Agency Limited

Boreham Mill, Bishopstrow, Wiltshire BA12 9HQ

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

The agency's statement of purpose states that they provide a service for looked after children and young people of all ages whose needs have been assessed by the responsible local authority as being best met by a foster carer.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 149 foster carers, with 198 children placed.

The agency was registered with Ofsted in April 2022. This is the agency's first inspection. The manager has been in post since October 2022 and is suitably experienced and qualified. Their application to register with Ofsted is in progress.

Inspection dates: 9 to 13 January 2023

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account **good**

How well children and young people are helped and protected **requires improvement to be 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: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

Since the agency was registered in April 2022, there has been a change in the registered manager and a number of changes to supervising social workers. Despite a period of instability and change, the agency is now managed well, and this is positively impacting on the outcomes of children living with foster carers.

Children benefit from being cared for and loved by child-centred foster carers who are safely recruited, assessed and, in the main, matched well with children. Inspectors found that, in a few cases, poor matching had contributed to placement breakdown and unplanned endings. It is recognised that since the new manager has been in post there has been a significant reduction in unplanned endings. Nevertheless, work continues to improve placement stability.

Children make good progress in all areas as a direct result of the time and effort put in by foster carers and supervising social workers. Children's school attendance and educational achievement are good, and a virtual homework club provided by the agency is a useful additional resource. For those children who remain living with their foster carer after they reach 18, some make excellent progress, for example, going to university or college.

Foster carers and children speak highly of the agency. The views of foster carers, children and professionals are gathered by the agency. However, managers and leaders are aware that further work is required to promote consultation and participation in the continued development of the agency.

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

Children living with foster carers are kept safe because the supervising social workers and foster carers understand the children's safeguarding needs. However, safeguarding practice can be improved by a more formalised approach. Inspectors found that some safer care plans for children and foster carers were generic and lacked the specific details of risk that foster carers need to better support children. It is recognised that work has been done to improve the quality of all safer care plans but this remains ongoing.

Unannounced visits to foster carers take place at least once a year and they receive regular supervision visits from their supervising social worker. Records of these visits are sufficiently detailed and record that the children are living in safe homes.

Foster carers receive a range of training, both face to face and via an online training package. However, not all foster carers have completed all mandatory training. Nonetheless, foster carers spoke positively about the training and how it helps them keep children safe.

When incidents of a safeguarding nature occur, including complaints and allegations, they are investigated appropriately. Supervising social workers and foster carers mostly share and report concerns promptly. When there has been delay and protocol has not been followed, the manager has taken swift action to review and implement any necessary training.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

Since the agency was registered in April 2022, there has been a challenging period brought about, in part, by ineffective leadership and management. For various reasons, some staff left the agency and this resulted in inconsistency in practice, some supervising social workers having high caseloads and some foster carers experiencing frequent changes to their supervising social worker.

A new manager has been appointed and has had an impressive impact in a relatively short period of time on the development of the agency. He has a wealth of knowledge and demonstrates passion, high aspiration and a dedication to the development of the agency. For example, he has already modified systems to review, record and monitor the quality of care and the safeguarding of children. Leaders and managers recognise that further work and time is necessary to embed these systems, which will in turn consolidate learning and further improve practice and outcomes.

The manager and responsible individual are extremely visible in the agency and are child-focused. Their ethos of providing children with the best care possible is clearly evident. Staff speak enthusiastically about their work. They overwhelmingly link this to the new manager and his knowledge, experience and support.

The fostering panel functions effectively, is safe and provides support and challenge appropriately. The panel chair is experienced in the field of children's social care and raises practice issues and challenges when appropriate to help the agency to improve. The agency decision-maker provides an appropriate level of scrutiny and challenge.

The leaders and managers understand the strengths of the agency and the areas in which it needs to develop. The agency is meeting its aims and objectives. However, further work is required to make sure that all foster carers complete mandatory training, safer care plans are personalised and the matching of children with foster carers is improved, to prevent unplanned endings. This is reflected in the three recommendations made.

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

Recommendations

- The registered person should ensure that all foster carers are trained in appropriate safer care practice, including skills to care for children who have been abused. In particular, this relates to the manager making sure that all safer care plans are personalised and provide foster carers with the strategies to safely care for children. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 4.6)
- The registered person should ensure that the fostering service only suggests foster carers to local authorities as a potential match for a child if the foster carer can reasonably be expected to meet the child's assessed needs and the impact of the placement on existing household members has been considered. Where gaps are identified, the fostering service should work with the responsible authority to ensure the placement plan sets out any additional training, resource or support required. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 15.1)
- The registered person should 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. In particular, the manager must make sure that all foster carers complete all mandatory training. ('Fostering services: national minimum standards', 20.8)

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: 2662429

Registered provider: The National Fostering Agency Limited

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

Responsible individual: Catherine Rioda

Registered manager: post vacant

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Inspectors

Linda Bond, Social Care Inspector

Penelope Kutz, Social Care Inspector

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