

Next Step Fostering Services

Next Step Fostering Services Limited

41 Stone Street, Faversham ME13 8PH

Inspected under the social care common inspection framework

Information about this independent fostering agency

Next Step Fostering is an independent fostering agency founded in 1996, providing services in Kent, East London, Surrey, Thames Valley and London boroughs, as part of the National Fostering Group. The agency was acquired by the National Fostering Group in August 2020.

The agency provides respite, short, medium and long-term care for children and young people, in addition to parent and child placements.

At the time of this inspection, the agency had 64 approved foster placements and 93 children in care.

The agency has been without a registered manager since June 2019.

Due to COVID-19, at the request of the Secretary of State, we suspended all routine inspections of social care providers carried out under the social care common inspection framework (SCCIF) on 17 March 2020. We returned to routine SCCIF inspections on 12 April 2021.

Inspection dates: 15 to 19 November 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: 25 September 2017

Overall judgement at last inspection: outstanding

Enforcement action since last inspection: none

Inspection judgements

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people: good

The acquisition of the agency in August 2020 by the National Fostering Group has not caused any discernible negative impact on the progress and well-being of the children. This is largely due to the significant effort by leaders and managers, and supervising social workers, to absorb the disruptive effects of the acquisition and to continue providing effective support to the foster carers. Throughout this period, most of the children have continued to make good progress and have had a positive experience of care. Those in local authorities who regularly commission placements for children with this agency confirm that the quality of care provided has remained consistently good throughout this period.

Foster carers display commitment and dedication to their roles and to the children in their care. They speak about the difficulties in adapting to what they see as a new organisational culture, but also of the positive developments that this has brought, in particular the accessibility and expansion of training. Foster carers speak highly of the support that they receive from their supervising social workers, and the new and prompt specialist behavioural support provided when difficult issues arise. This enables them to maintain stability for the children and a positive care experience.

The matching of the children's needs with the capabilities of the foster carers is carefully considered, and breakdowns in placements due to possible mismatch in this regard are few. For example, there were four breakdowns in placements for the first half of 2021. This contributes to providing stability and permanence for the children.

The children's full engagement in the most suitable education setting receives a high priority. Children's attendance and performance is closely monitored, and targeted support is provided to children who are identified as being vulnerable to disengaging with their learning. Additional support and monitoring have been provided to the children who have had to be educated from home during the pandemic. A wide range of resources is made available to the foster carers to support and enhance the children's education. This includes the agency funding an online subscription for an educational resource for all foster carers. This strong commitment to the children's education supports their best possible progress and achievement.

During the pandemic, the agency staff have been creative and inventive by enabling the children to experience a sense of community and participation in the agency's activities. Various virtual activities were held, including regular competitions. As restrictions have been lifted, opportunities have been taken for well-funded group adventure and fun activities. These efforts help the children to feel part of the wider organisation and create opportunities for friendships.

The agency continues to make concerted efforts to hear and understand what the children are saying about their care experience and how this can be further enriched. This is achieved through various feedback questionnaires, surveys and group discussions. A set of children's questions has been compiled for prospective

foster carers as part of the selection and approval process. This involvement and participation of the children reduces feelings of isolation, helps to make them feel valued, and enriches their care experience.

A well-resourced team is strongly focused on giving those interested in fostering a positive experience during the initial process. When this progresses, the team aims to provide a caring and professional service to applicants to the point of approval and beyond. The agency is generous in affirming and recognising the commitment and development of the foster carers and to supporting them financially during breaks in care episodes. Foster carers speak highly of the agency's caring ethos. The overall approach of the agency towards the foster carers contributes to stable placements and a good quality of care for the children.

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

Foster carers have ready access to good-quality online training that can be tailored to their individual needs. This training is supplemented by face-to-face training when this is the preferred option. Supervising social workers are able to monitor effectively the progress that the foster carers are making and provide support and reflection on their professional development. This enables the foster carers to maintain and develop their knowledge and awareness of safeguarding issues and helps them to make the children safer.

There is a strong culture across the whole organisation focused on keeping the children safe and protecting their well-being. The safety and well-being of the children features prominently on most documents and discussion agendas. On the occasions when the safety and well-being of individual children are compromised, for example when they go missing, the response of the foster carers is urgent, sustained and in line with procedures. This reduces the risk of harm to the children.

The agency's safeguarding leads respond systematically and comprehensively to safeguarding incidents. This includes reflection on how incidents may have been prevented and what lessons can be learned. This whole-organisation approach to safeguarding practice protects the children and helps them to become safer.

At times, the oversight of placements has been insufficient, for example there has been a lack of rigour and challenge in the event of poor performance of foster carers. This includes daily logs lacking in necessary detail, missed supervision, and ineffective challenge to elements of foster carers' practice. This leaves some of the children vulnerable to harm and undermines their best possible progress.

The effectiveness of leaders and managers: good

The acquisition of the agency in August 2020 resulted in significant changes to information systems, processes and procedures. Staffing was reduced and structures changed. A new online training system was introduced, and new policies were adopted. According to the staff and foster carers, the pressures of introducing changes were particularly felt during the first quarter of 2021. This coincided with a

period of national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a period of interim management arrangements, following the unplanned departure of a manager. Further, key staff, including long-standing supervising social workers, left the agency. These combined factors worked together to produce significant pressure on the service.

The service is currently run by a stable and effective leadership team. Leaders and managers have been tenacious and focused on maintaining stability and consistency of placements through their support to foster carers. This has enabled the children to continue making progress and to have a positive care experience.

There have been shortfalls in providing regular, good-quality supervision to foster carers. There has also been an ineffective escalation of failures by placing authorities to provide key information about the plans for children, in particular decisions about staying put arrangements. For one child, the failure of their local authority to provide clarity and certainty about the child's future led to some unsettled risk-taking behaviour by the child. The agency failed to escalate effectively the poor performance by those responsible in the local authority.

Leaders and managers display clear insight into the current strengths and weaknesses of the service and have prioritised the areas for improvement. When failures are identified and incidents occur, particularly those relating to the children's safety and well-being, the response of leaders is swift, strong and measured. Actions taken prioritise the needs and well-being of the children. This builds on the positive safeguarding culture of the organisation and minimises or prevents harm to the children.

Leaders and managers are ambitious about what the children can achieve and place no limits on their aspirations. They show determination to further develop and improve the service so that the children receive the best possible support and care to achieve their potential.

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 fostering service provider must ensure that, in relation to any child placed or to be placed with a foster parent, the foster parent is given such information, which is kept up to date, as to enable him to provide appropriate care for the child, and in particular that each foster parent is provided with a copy of the most recent version of the child's care plan provided to the fostering service provider under regulation 6 (3)(d) of the Care Planning Regulations. (Regulation 17 (3))</p> <p>In particular, the manager must effectively escalate the failure of local authorities to provide such plans when this undermines the stability of children's care.</p>	19 February 2022
<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>	19 February 2022

Recommendation

- The registered person should ensure that each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year. Meetings have a clear purpose and provide the opportunity to supervise the foster carer's work, ensure the foster carer is meeting the child's needs, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, and offer support and a framework to assess the carer's performance and develop their competencies and skills. The frequency of meetings for short break foster carers should be proportionate to the amount of care provided. Foster carers' files include records of supervisory meetings. (NMS 21.8)

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: SC036540

Registered provider: Next Step Fostering Services Limited

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

Responsible individual: James Flanagan

Registered manager: Post vacant

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Inspectors

John Pledger, Social Care Inspector

Amanda Harvey, Social Care Inspector

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