

Reach-Out Care Limited

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Stephen Graham / Stephen Smith
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About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcome for children set out in the Children Act 2004 and relevant National Minimum Standards for the establishment.

The inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding:	this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality
Good:	this aspect of the provision is strong
Satisfactory:	this aspect of the provision is sound
Inadequate:	this aspect of the provision is not good enough

Service information

Brief description of the service

Reach-Out Care independent fostering agency has been in operation since 1999. It is based in office accommodation close to the centre of Newton Aycliffe. The fostering team comprises a currently temporary manager, social worker, support workers and administrative staff supporting around 10 carers. At the time of this inspection six children were placed with the service.

Summary

The previous manager of the agency had recently resigned their post and at the time of the inspection a temporary management arrangement had been put in place with the agreement of Ofsted. During this visit the inspectors found that the agency have worked to respond positively to the previous requirements set and recommendations made. The views of children, their carers and placing social workers received during the inspection further endorsed this. Very positively, those carers visited as part of this inspection were prepared to be interviewed and co-operated fully with the inspectors during each of the home visits undertaken.

The overall quality rating is satisfactory.

This is an overview of what the inspector found during the inspection.

Improvements since the last inspection

The individual support provided to all foster carers and young people is an ongoing strength of the service. In particular, it was noted that each of its current foster carers are involved in study leading toward their National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) level three in working with children. When carers and social workers placing children through the service were asked, 'What does this service do well?' one carer stated that, 'training is much better than previous training.' One social worker said that the, 'support to young people is very good.' When young people were asked, 'What is the service good at doing?' one responded, 'controlling me, giving me advice, help me to sort out problems, teaching me right from wrong.' Another young person simply stated that the service is good at, 'looking after children and young people.' The service has worked hard to improve liaison with placing social workers and their team managers with the aim of ensuring that full copies of required documentation for children 'Looked After' are obtained and provided to the children's foster carers. The previous inspection had recommended that, 'when children are placed with carers the documentation used to demonstrate that they have been appropriately matched should be maintained on file.' In response to this, carers and staff highlighted very positively the ongoing work by the service to ensure better future matching. Carer files examined contained a clear 'notice of approval'. Carers training records have improved with those examined generally well presented. Children's records confirmed that they have received their statutory annual medical examinations. All social workers placing children with the agency are provided with a copy of the agency complaints procedures. Reports for carers annual review meetings now include the date of their completion. Foster care agreements now have the required information presented in better detail.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Young people benefit from health care services that meet their overall physical, social and emotional developmental needs. Very positive questionnaire responses were received from foster carers describing why they felt that this was true. In particular they highlighted the

written information on the procedures and administration and storage of medication, the training session on healthy eating and a paediatric first aid course. One described how their supervising social worker gives advice regarding contacting health professionals. Another described how relevant training and monthly supervision is provided. In group discussion, carers confirmed that they get full details of the health needs of children in advance and know the arrangements to register children with doctors, dentists and opticians. All carers were positive that if health information was not immediately available then the agency would give a high priority to obtaining it. Carers know their role in supporting children with their health appointments, diet, personal hygiene and to advocate for each child. Carers give health information to the children's care reviews. Carers said how the agency supports them to access more specialised health services where this was needed. One carer said that they had requested additional first aid training and the service had provided it. Training records show that a number of carers had recently completed refresher 'first aid' and 'health and safety' training. The service supports carers to encourage healthy eating and exercise by young people. Carers and children have received further education and support in this. The service knows about specialist health services in the local area and access to these is considered during the planning of placements. The service is currently using British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) guidelines to review current arrangements where the adult carers of fostered children are acknowledged smokers. Children and young people provided some good examples when asked about healthy eating. One young person described how, 'My foster carer encourages me not to eat chips'. Another, how their carers, 'Tell (me) to eat less sweets, chips and other rubbish and more apples'. Children and young people said that they receive encouragement to help with choosing, buying and cooking food. One young person highlighted how, 'I cook my own tea, make my packed lunch'. The children and young people said that they are registered with doctors and dentists and had access to medical services when needed. No concerns regarding their individual health were raised by any young person.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is satisfactory.

The previously registered manager of the service had left shortly before this announced inspection took place. A temporary manager has been appointed by the registered provider, with the agreement of Ofsted that this arrangement continue for a period of up to three months. There are procedures for the recruitment of new staff. The staff files examined did not contain all the required information. For example, the original start date for one employee was not clearly recorded and previous employment histories were not sufficiently detailed. Although the staff team is small, unqualified staff are always appropriately supervised and supported by qualified staff. The service monitors the quality of each home environment through regular inspections. Foster carer files and group discussion with the carers themselves confirmed that health and safety checklists are in use and are being updated through the annual review processes for foster carers. Carers described the safety checks as thorough. However, inspectors found that some of the recording within the checklists had limited detail and assessment particularly with regard to potential risks with domestic pets. There is limited detail of recording when vehicles are used to transport children. In another example no written evidence of a domestic gas safety check was available within the carers file. Some positive examples of the work undertaken to keep children safe were received. One carer highlighted that, 'risk assessments are updated if and when needed, this may be discussed at my monthly supervision'. One placing social worker highlighted how the agency, 'liaised with me about child wearing cycle helmet when out on bike. Liaised about safety of child travelling to/from contact'. Only

a small number of children had been placed since the previous inspection and the manager confirmed that each of these had been made under 'emergency' circumstances. Carers involved in these placements described how, although only limited initial emergency information had been provided to them, staff had worked with the placing social worker to obtain and provide more information about the young person and their circumstances. Carers spoke positively regarding the work by the service to properly match these children, despite the 'emergency' circumstances, and to provide full information on them. However, one carer did highlight how more significant issues of concern regarding the behaviour of one young person had only come to light after the placement had been made, with only limited initial information provided to them. Children's care files provided better evidence of good matching of children with carers. Comments on one file from a placing authority were positive about the work undertaken with the young person and recommended that they should remain with and benefit from their current carers through into adulthood. Other files showed that although initial matching had not appeared good, carers had worked with the support of the agency to successfully improve the quality of care provided to those young people. Carers said that placement agreement meetings usually occurred promptly as children were placed with them, and that if delays occurred, the agency were quick to prompt placing social workers to ensure these meetings took place at the earliest opportunity. Some older care files had examples of incomplete placement agreement documentation. The matching section in one file, where the child had been placed for a number of years, was empty. During group discussion, children and young people were very positive regarding the efforts made by Reach-Out Care to 'match' them with their carers. Each of the children had been living with their carers for more than two years. Most had benefited from the initial planning of their placements and were happy at the efforts made to introduce them to their new carers. One young person described how they had been placed as an emergency but this had not caused them any concern and they were happy that their placement had subsequently become long-term. Carers are provided with necessary training to ensure that children and young people are protected from abuse and neglect. A number of carers have recently completed additional 'safe care and managing allegations' training provided by the agency. A carers' training pack regarding the protection of children from bullying is being introduced. The previous inspection had recommended that 'records of agreed safe caring policies should be maintained within carers files'. During this visit there was one example where no evidence was available to confirm whether this document had been sent or agreed by the service, carer and placing social worker. One risk assessment did not have enough information about the steps taken by carers and staff to work with the young person to minimise their risks. One carer felt that the agency gives very good support and training for handling difficult behaviours. There are clear procedures in place for carers, should children ever go missing. Carers were aware of these and also aware of the out of hours support available. There are management systems to monitor the responses to any allegations made. Some examples of delays in 'critical incident forms' being signed off as 'checked' by the manager were noted. In some examples the 'critical incident forms' had not been copied into the young person's own care file. None of the young people consulted had any concern that they had ever been bullied by other children and young people in Reach-Out Care or had ever seen others being bullied. All said that they would be able to talk to someone and receive support if it occurred or they were unhappy for any other reason. One young person highlighted the educational support worker in particular as someone to trust and talk to. When asked specifically, 'Does Reach Out Care do anything to help you learn about how to keep yourself safe?' children responded positively with one stating, 'yes they keep me safe a lot' with another young person adding, 'yes people talk to me about keeping safe'. During group discussion, one young person

highlighted how their carer had set up their mobile phone to ensure that it remained in credit for emergency use by the young person if ever needed. The evidence from the home visits undertaken also confirmed that children know how to complain and had access to a 'children's guide' to the service. The recently appointed chair to the fostering panel was interviewed and they confirmed that significant changes had occurred to the panel since the previous inspection. Only three of its previous members are still in post and the panel chair had only recently been appointed. They described positively how their previous skills and experience would be used in this new role and expressed their satisfaction with the induction provided by the service. They demonstrated a clear understanding of the policies and procedures in place to help panel members make decisions, were aware of the background and experience of other panel members and knew of the checks undertaken by the service to ensure their suitability. The quality of recording within panel minutes is not always detailed enough to provide clear confirmation that where issues have been carried forward from one panel meeting to another, those issues have been addressed and concluded. The sections of panel minutes, separated off and placed within individual carers files for specific reference, do not include the details of the panel members involved in the decision. Carers confirmed that they are invited to the fostering panel to discuss their annual review reports and files examined contained copies of their invitation letters.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

The service works to ensure that children and young people are provided with foster care services that value diversity and promote equality. It gives a high priority to ensuring that the educational needs of each child and young person are met. The service has placed children from a non-white British background and the manager gave a specific example of discrimination being encountered by a young person within their local community. The carers and young person had been offered extra support by the agency to help address this. The carer also received specific support, training and guidance in working specifically to promote the young person's identity. All the training provided by the service takes into account diversity and anti oppressive practice. Policies and procedures are regularly updated to ensure that this is reflected. The service has organised a presentation to a black community group to help promote the recruitment of carers from non-white British backgrounds. Children said that they are involved in a variety of personal hobbies and interests in the community and that they are supported by their carers in accessing and maintaining these interests. When asked, 'How do you spend your spare time during evenings and at weekends?' and 'do you have any hobbies or special interests?', children and young people provided a number of examples such as 'playing football, go out with friends, play on play station' also 'I go out on Wednesday to girls night at the youth group, Thursday it's a mixed youth group and on a Friday I go to a disco' and 'I go swimming on a Wednesday and on the weekend'. Children also confirmed that they are helped to find out about the local and wider community, for example, clubs, outings, groups and shopping. They also said that they could meet up and visit friends as well as having friends come to visit them. Children gave examples of garden trampolines being provided at home and highlighted involvement in a variety of community activities. They gave examples of, art club, drama, 'Chicken Shed'-youth club, football, disco and swimming. The manager also highlighted how, 'Two of our young people have been encouraged to access disability clubs'. One foster carer highlighted how, 'personal hobbies have been promoted through care workers taking the children out for activities'. Another simply stated that 'All activities (are) encouraged'. The manager said that, 'Some of our young people work on a voluntary basis in the community.

One of our young people plays football for a local club. We also have a young person involved in a local drama club and puts on performances for the local community'. Young people spoke very positively regarding the support they receive from their carers with school issues and their general education. They are provided with additional support by the service through a dedicated education worker and again they spoke very highly of the support they had received. One foster carer described how the, 'support for education in/with school and for college has been excellent in the last two years. The support worker helps mainly at home rather than in school because of the young person's needs, they are flexible to what is needed. (The named young person) has just got better than hoped for results in their exams, they are progressing on to college and seem positive about it.' In group discussion foster carers provided good examples of positive work by the agency to ensure that children's educational needs continue to be met. One carer gave an example of the work undertaken to help one young person move to the same local school as the carer's own children and their friends. Carers also gave examples of how supervising social workers from the agency provided support to carers and young people at Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings. One carer highlighted how their support worker had encouraged the good relationship between the school and the carer and as a result had been able to do some good work with regard to truanting issues with one young person. Care files provided good evidence that foster carers are contributing to the assessment and review of children's educational needs, that PEPs are being followed, delivering good educational outcomes for children and young people placed through the service. Children and young people were happy to confirm that: they are given enough help with their school and college work; they have enough space and the right things to help them to do their work; and that they are involved in meetings about their progress and in thinking about their future plans. The manager highlighted the key role played by the educational worker in working closely with the children's schools and the positive benefits of this for children in having their educational needs met. They also stated that, 'The current placements have seen significant improvements with the young people. All young people enjoy out of school activities and have good relationships with friends'. The manager confirmed that the agency is continuing to promote education and looks at more specific work that can be undertaken when young people are excluded. Very positively, the manager confirmed that all children have a PEP and benefit from regular school attendance and appropriate educational support. One carer gave their view that the, 'teacher support has been exceptional from my experience with the help and support I and the child have received. He has been supported in and out of school and also helped with accessing college, also supported with taster sessions in college'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

The service ensures that contact is both promoted and monitored. Children are consulted with regularly and are able to raise and discuss any concerns they may have regarding the care they receive. Children confirmed that they are supported by their carers and the service in maintaining contact with their parents and that arrangements are monitored to ensure that they stay safe. The view of foster carers is that children are well supported in maintaining contact with family and friends. The preference of the young person is taken into consideration when deciding whether agency staff or carers would act as the main support worker within the contact arrangement. Carers generally felt that the information provided to them about contact arrangements was good and that generally they were 'well briefed'. Files examined during the inspection also provided good evidence of this with necessary descriptions and consents in place. With regard to consultation, one carer highlighted the, 'safe caring policy, looked after

care reviews, regular visits from social worker, complaints reported to my link worker' as ways in which this was achieved. Children confirmed that they were aware of their care reviews, that they could attend these meetings or provide written reports to them if they preferred. Carers confirmed that they are regularly consulted regarding care arrangements and that they attend children's reviews. The children and their carers are visited regularly by their placing social workers. Children can raise any concerns or complaints that they may have, they know who to speak to if they are unhappy with their foster carer. They were equally positive regarding consultation with them on the use of approved sanctions and also when asked, 'Do you think that the rules where you live are fair?'. Children were able to give examples of being grounded as a result of not following the rules, with one young person adding that, 'People talk to me about the rules I've broken.' The complaints guide for young people has been updated to include contact details for Ofsted. The guide is well presented and includes a pictorial guide for children, a Reach-Out Care confidential helpline and an enclosed complaints envelope that will only be opened by the Registered Individual for the service. Other external contact numbers are also provided within the guide, these include Childline, NSPCC, Kidscape and the National Youth Advocacy Service. There have been no complaints received by the service from anybody in the last twelve months.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is not judged.

Organisation

The organisation is satisfactory.

The current Statement of Purpose (SoP) for the service has been recently reviewed and was generally comprehensive. However, it did not include sufficient information on the services and facilities provided, the constitution of the organisation and the processes to review and manage training. The children's guide to the service has been recently updated with young people consulted and contributing to the review of the guide. However, a number of children were uncertain if they had been previously provided with their own personal copy of the guide. The service is effectively organised and staffed. Previously completed assessments of new foster carers had been acknowledged by the service as being in need of review and update and work has taken place to ensure that this has been completed for all approved carers. Those examples examined provided good evidence of the updates undertaken, however, some confusion was evident in how original checks and assessments had been combined with updated information. The manager described how recent recruitment of carers had been difficult, but that the agency is working to improve this through 'word of mouth' recruitment using the positive experiences of the current foster carers and young people to further promote this. The manager also highlighted how new recruitment leaflets have been introduced and distributed to further promote the positive changes taking place within the service. To effectively manage and support of carers, the service actively promotes the foster carers' own support group, and regularly schedules opportunities for the group to meet. The number of approved carers is currently low, consequently attendance at the group reflects this. Formal supervision agreements are used by staff and carers to confirm supervision arrangements. These are completed in good detail and are focused clearly on obtaining good outcomes for children. Some had not been signed in confirmation by the carer or their supervising social worker. In one example although the carer themselves confirmed that they had received regular supervision, a gap of six months was noted in the record of supervision within their file. This was acknowledged by the manager, who confirmed the reasons for it and the steps being taken to rectify this. Foster carers were

very positive regarding the efforts being made by the service to further improve the quality of support provided to them. One carer described how, 'the service was weak early on. If it had not been for one support worker we would probably have given up. The service is improving as it is changing, support, and training (are) all getting much better. I'm very happy with how it is now.' Carers were complimentary regarding the quality of 'out of hours' support provided by the service. They also confirmed that access to respite care was given a high priority by the agency and had improved. One carer did highlight difficulties with this due to the profound special needs of the young person cared for. Other carers spoke positively, with one stating that the agency, 'chase us to make sure we take it'. The same carer also highlighted the good individual support that they have received from the agency. Generally carers were clear with regard to the role of their supervising social worker. When asked, 'How well does the service involve you and communicate with you and other agencies to promote good outcomes for the children and young people?' one carer responded, 'I am satisfied with the professional support I get from Reach-Out Care'. When social workers placing children through the service were asked the same question one highlighted the 'good communication' as a particular strength of the service. Annual review reports for carers are made available to the fostering panel. However, files did not always include the relevant panel minutes to allow confirmation of the discussion undertaken around these reports. In some examples the history of their approval was difficult to confirm from the carers files. Review reports and outcomes were not always dated and the confirmation of completion of required training was sometimes difficult to confirm through the review process recording. Carers are generally clear regarding the reviewing processes. All those spoken with felt that it was thorough and that the views of children, young people and their social workers were sought. They also confirmed that the service used it as an opportunity to ensure that necessary checks on foster carers were routinely updated. The Foster Carer Handbook was examined and was seen to be comprehensive and to provide carers with detailed guidance, linking in well with the promotion and achievement of 'good outcomes' for children and young people in foster care. Foster carer agreements comply with fostering regulations, although it was acknowledged that they currently refer to the 'commission' rather than Ofsted this will be updated over time. There is an appropriate system to monitor and record complaints, representations and any allegations of abuse. The procedures by which incidents and allegations should be notified to Ofsted were reviewed and confirmed with the acting manager. The agency provides a comprehensive training programme including both required and recommended training opportunities to ensure that foster carers have the skills required to care for and meet the needs of each young person placed with them. Although none of the agency's current carers hold an National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), very positively all are currently working toward it. Training information within the carers' files included records of attendance and certificates of completion and these were generally well presented. The manager acknowledged that 'anti-bullying' training was not on the current schedule, but confirmed that the agency had obtained a training pack which would be made available to foster carers. Training in behaviour management is scheduled on the training programme and is imminent. From the training records, examples of joint training provided to the benefit of carers and their supervising social workers were noted. The agency must maintain a copy of Looked After Children (LAC) documentation 'Placement plans parts 1 & 2' and 'Essential information parts 1 & 2' in respect of all children placed and should ensure that carers have a copy of the aforementioned information. With some of the files examined these documents were seen to be in place and to have been regularly updated where necessary. However, with some older examples LAC documentation remained either incomplete or in need of update. The administrative systems and records maintained by the service are generally robust. Systems are in place to monitor

their adequacy and improve their quality where necessary. Although a central register is maintained, individual carers files do not currently include a list of the current and previous placements of children with them. In one of the carer files the file structure itself was noted to be poor with some examples of misfiling within it. As previously highlighted, difficulties existed in separating original checks and assessments from that information which had been subsequently updated by the service.

What must be done to secure future improvement?

Statutory requirements

This section sets out the actions, which must be taken so that the registered person meets the Care Standards Act 2000, The Fostering Services Regulations 2005 and the National Minimum Standards. The Registered Provider must comply with the given timescales.

Standard	Action	Due date
15	follow clear procedures for the recruitment and selection of staff/foster carers to ensure children are protected	7 September 2007
24	ensure that foster carers are provided with up to date records of the children and young people they care for	5 October 2007

Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- ensure that foster carer health and safety checklists are sufficiently detailed to allow confirmation that foster children are protected from any potential risk from domestic pets, that vehicles used to transport children are safe and that domestic appliances are regularly checked to ensure they pose no hazard to children
- ensure that when children are placed with carers the documentation used to demonstrate that they have been appropriately matched is maintained on file
- ensure that the safe caring agreements maintained within foster carers files contain confirmation that they have been shared and agreed by the foster carer, the agency and the child's own placing social worker
- ensure that 'critical incident forms' are promptly checked and signed off by the manager and that copies of these are placed on the young person's own care file
- ensure that fostering panel minutes are sufficiently detailed to provide clear confirmation that where issues are carried forward from one panel meeting to another, they have been addressed and concluded. Extracts from panel minutes placed within individual carers' files for reference must include the details of the panel members in attendance at those meetings and their specific panel role
- update the Statement of Purpose to include more detailed information on the statement of services/facilities provided, the constitution of the organisation and the processes to review and manage foster carer training
- ensure that every young person is provided with a Children's Guide to the service

- ensure that where foster carer assessments are reviewed and updated, the records provide sufficient clarity regarding the processes by which original checks and assessments are combined with updated information
- ensure that all records of supervision are maintained safely and securely within foster carers' files and that each record is signed by the foster carer and their supervising social worker
- ensure that the relevant fostering panel minutes relating to each foster carer's annual review are maintained within the carer's file. Ensure that review reports and outcomes are dated and that they provide clear confirmation of the completion of required training by carers
- ensure that the history of approval for each carer is clearly documented and can be easily be confirmed from their files
- ensure that individual carers' files include a list of the current and previous placements of children with them, and that carer files are generally maintained in good order.

Annex

Annex A

National Minimum Standards for independent fostering agency

Being healthy

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes the health and development of children (NMS 12)

Ofsted considers 12 the key standard to be inspected.

Staying safe

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- any persons carrying on or managing the service are suitable (NMS 3)
- the fostering service provides suitable foster carers (NMS 6)
- the service matches children to carers appropriately (NMS 8)
- the fostering service protects each child or young person from abuse and neglect (NMS 9)
- the people who work in or for the fostering service are suitable to work with children and young people (NMS 15)
- fostering panels are organised efficiently and effectively (NMS 30)

Ofsted considers 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 and 30 the key standards to be inspected.

Enjoying and achieving

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service values diversity (NMS 7)
- the fostering service promotes educational achievement (NMS 13)
- when foster care is provided as a short-term break for a child, the arrangements recognise that the parents remain the main carers for the child (NMS 31)

Ofsted considers 7, 13 and 31 the key standards to be inspected.

Making a positive contribution

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service promotes contact arrangements for the child or young person (NMS 10)
- the fostering service promotes consultation (NMS 11)

Ofsted considers 10 and 11 the key standards to be inspected.

Achieving economic well-being

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- the fostering service prepares young people for adulthood (NMS 14)
- the fostering service pays carers an allowance and agreed expenses as specified (NMS 29)

Ofsted considers none of the above to be key standards to be inspected.

Organisation

The intended outcomes for these standards are:

- there is a clear statement of the aims and objectives of the fostering service and the fostering service ensures that they meet those aims and objectives (NMS 1)
- the fostering service is managed by those with the appropriate skills and experience (NMS 2)
- the fostering service is monitored and controlled as specified (NMS 4)

Annex A

- the fostering service is managed effectively and efficiently (NMS 5)
- staff are organised and managed effectively (NMS 16)
- the fostering service has an adequate number of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (NMS 17)
- the fostering service is a fair and competent employer (NMS 18)
- there is a good quality training programme (NMS 19)
- all staff are properly accountable and supported (NMS 20)
- the fostering service has a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (NMS 21)
- foster carers are provided with supervision and support (NMS 22)
- foster carers are appropriately trained (NMS 23)
- case records for children are comprehensive (NMS 24)
- the administrative records are maintained as required (NMS 25)
- The premises used as offices by the fostering service are suitable for the purpose (NMS 26)
- the fostering service is financially viable (NMS 27)
- the fostering service has robust financial processes (NMS 28)
- local authority fostering services recognise the contribution made by family and friends as carers (NMS 32)

Ofsted considers 1, 16, 17, 21, 24, 25 and 32 the key standards to be inspected.