

Foster Care NCH Broad Options

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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Inspector	Patrick Gough
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Address	N C H Broad Options 479 Margate Road BROADSTAIRS Kent CT10 2QA
Telephone number	01843 601101
Email	foster.carebroadshires@nch.org.uk
Registered person	N C H
Registered manager	Tracy Livesey
Responsible individual	Karen Jane Harvey
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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

Fostercare NCH Broad Options is a family placement project run by a national charitable organisation and one, which operates in compliance with NCH policies that govern the service that is provided for looked after children. The office is situated in Broadstairs and supports two areas, Kent and London. At the time of the inspection there were 42 approved foster carers looking after 43 children. The office, which is attached to a specialist education service run by the same organisation, has first floor accommodation, which includes an open office for administrators and supervising social workers, smaller offices for management and finance staff and training and conference facilities. The statement of purpose is sent to placing authorities and inspection reports are made available. The children's guide is made available to the young person prior to admission.

Summary

This was an announced inspection to regulate the operation of the fostering service and to follow up on the action taken to address the requirements and recommendations issued at the previous inspection. The findings of the visit are based on the agency's application of the key National Minimum Standards and its adherence to the Fostering Services Regulations 2002. The service continues to provide a high quality of support to the carers, which encourages good outcomes for the young people. The quality of the information on the young people and the care and practice methodology, used by the carers, promotes healthy lifestyles. Sufficient resources are directed towards raising the awareness of carers on the importance of the wider health issues, such as, sex education and substance abuse. Despite some recent restructuring and a temporary shortfall in staffing, the agency has managed to maintain stability within the staff team and sustained consistency within the provision. The quality of assessments conducted on prospective carers is good and there is effective placement matching. There are sound systems in place, supported by training, to ensure adequate safeguarding practice. This practice is further enhanced through the agency's focus on enabling carers to give young people better protection against the growing threat of knife and gun crime, particularly within the London area. The agency and the carers demonstrate a determination to improve the young people's chances of successful outcomes through formal education. There is a focus on achievement in educational settings. Attempts to re-create the children's forum, which was a successful consultation tool in the past, have been unsuccessful. The children are consulted through other means. The agency recently launched a survey of young people on issues relevant to their care and is currently analysing the responses. A young adult, formerly fostered through the agency, has been asked to participate on the recruitment panel due to interview candidates for social work positions within the service. The approach to preparing young people for adulthood is weak. The agency has begun to address the issue following the recommendation from the previous visit and intends to create a life skills programme which can be adapted to a wide age and ability range. Whilst there is a proposed training programme it is not satisfactorily implemented. Not all the carers participate as regularly as they should. The service manager is looking at various strategies to manage this shortfall. There is good leadership and the service is well managed. The team works well together and formal supervision and work performance appraisal is conducted as required.

The overall quality rating is outstanding.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Four good practice recommendations were made at the last inspection. Three out of the four were adequately addressed and the fourth is in the initial stages of development. The agency conducts a risk assessment prior to the initial occurrence of supervised contact. The quality of the content of carers' supervision notes has improved and there is greater consistency on the level of detail. The agency continues to guide and support carers to record the developmental progress of the young people in their care. There is a commitment to achieving a better record of the young people's achievements throughout their fostering experience. The task of creating a wide ranging life skills programme for the carers to implement with the young people remains unfinished. Although some work has been done on the project, it will remain a good practice recommendation.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

There is a good level of information on health matters in the children's files. This information provides the carers with the necessary knowledge to register the child with health practitioners and to create a health plan. The agency provides the carers with sufficient guidance on their role in promoting the health of young people, through the foster care agreement and the carer's handbook. Training, such as 'health and sex education for young people' supplements the input on health matters within the 'skills to foster' course. The agency gives good support to the carers through links with community health agencies, such as child mental health services. The carers promote healthy living by providing healthy foods and encouraging the children to take exercise and rest, in moderation. The service provides training on sex education and the young people confirm that they are advised against smoking. The carers engage in drug awareness sessions and there are plans to provide similar opportunities for the young people.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is outstanding.

The management structure remains unchanged and this has provided continuity and stability within this service over recent years. The agency is part of a national provision and the provider implements stringent recruitment processes. The carers provide comfortable accommodation for the children. Their bedrooms are well furnished and equipped and the space and privacy afforded them supports their sense of worth and well being. The monthly home visits by the supervising social workers and the weekly telephone contact by the agency provides the necessary stimulation and support for the carers to manage their roles effectively. All health and safety precautions are fulfilled through specific training and risk assessments. The supervising social worker supplements the written guidance and assessments during the home visits by checking health and safety issues and speaking with the children. The agency gives good consideration to the competencies of the carer and the identified needs of the child before there is agreement to place the child. Non emergency placements are preceded by an introductory period whereby the child and carers can get to know each other prior to placement. The foster panel demonstrates, through its attention to carer's competencies and experience within the approval stage, the importance given to accessing the appropriate placements for the young people. The agency secures the essential information on the child to make an informed judgement on what constitutes the most appropriate placement to meet the child's needs. The children benefit from effective placement matching. The agency provides all the necessary information on the child protection measures the carer needs to take, prior to the placement

of children. The skills to foster course and specific child protection related training such as, 'managing allegations' and 'working with abused children', equips the carers with the knowledge to keep children safe. The written guidance and protocols, combined with the training and other support systems that are in place for the carers, promotes the safeguarding of the children. The agency is proactive in its response to present day threats to the safety of young people. It has forged a link with a service group designed to provide guidance and practical support to carers concerned about young people exposed to the effects of knife and gun crime. The agency continues to advocate for young people who are at risk of custodial sentencing through its support for the 'intensive fostering' scheme. It is engaging an experienced worker to liaise closely with youth offending teams to determine how it can persuade the judicial system to use intensive fostering for young people as an alternative to custody. There are clear written recruitment procedures in place. The agency's approach to the selection of qualified and experienced staff contributes to the well being of the young people in placement. All the senior staff and social workers have the appropriate qualification and the relevant experience to perform their roles effectively. The role of the foster panel is clearly defined. The panel membership includes expertise on health and education as well as the knowledge and experience of a foster carer. The minutes of previous panel meetings provide good evidence of the effective role it plays in selecting a good range of suitable foster carers. The level of questioning engaged at the carer's approval and their review of approval confirms the panel's commitment to recruitment of carers with the necessary qualities to safeguard children and meet their broad range of needs.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

There is good consideration given to diversity when matching children to placements. Whilst ethnicity and its related components feature where appropriate, one of the most pressing diverse need is education. The agency indicates that it is difficult to access statements of educational needs for children and in some cases young people are disadvantaged because they cannot access specialist resources within mainstream settings. It remains difficult for the agency to recruit sufficient carers within its operational remit to meet the needs of children indigenous to the London area. The carers receive good guidance and training which enables them to implement the agency's policy on diversity. The supervising social workers assist the carers where necessary in their drive to access equal opportunities for the children. The agency uses relevant material, such as for example 'life and law in Britain', a guide, produced by the citizenship foundation, for young asylum seekers. The service promotes the importance of children's participation and achievement in educational settings. The role of the carer in implementing this policy and supporting the child is clearly stated in the carer agreement and supporting documentation. All but three of the children in placement are in either a mainstream setting or placed in a specialist educational provision. The young people's personal education plans and their school attendance is monitored and the agency takes remedial action where necessary. The carers and the supervising social worker attend PEP meetings to advocate for the child. All school exclusions are monitored and the agency takes subsequent action to address the causation. Arrangements are made to provide tuition to young people while appropriate education or training facilities are arranged. The agency seeks opportunities for young people to benefit from self esteem boosting experiences. For example, one young person was chosen to be the mascot for the national cricket team at a prestigious event.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The importance of supporting the child to maintain contact with family is emphasised throughout the carer's assessment and in their training prior to receiving a placement. There is a designated member of staff within the team with specific responsibility for supporting the contact arrangements and particularly for the transport to venues and supervision. A risk assessment is conducted prior to the contact occurring. Contact arrangements are clearly set out in the placement plan and agreement. The child's emotional wellbeing is, on occasions, compromised by the placing authority's insistence that contact with parents occurs regardless of the benefits to the child. The agency provides the placing authority with a written report on the usefulness of the supervised contact and its impact on the welfare of the child. Where appropriate the views of the child are sought in determining arrangements. The carers support the agency's positive approach to providing contact and the supervising social worker discusses the outcome of contact meetings during supervision visits. The establishment of a children's forum is not widely supported by the children. Notwithstanding its early success which culminated in a number of young people contributing to the children's guide, more recently the agency has had to use various means to revive it without much success. The children that completed the pre-inspection surveys all commented that they are consulted both by the carers and the agency. This was confirmed by other young people seen during the inspection. A recent survey, conducted by the agency, has ascertained the views of young people on a number of issues including the content of the children's guide, their understanding of the complaints process and their access to someone if they wish to talk. The service manager is in the process of analysing the responses so that they can be addressed through supervising social worker visits and other forums. The agency is planning to include a young adult, formerly fostered within the agency, on the staff recruitment panel. The service manager is due to meet with the young adult to determine what questions she wishes to put to candidates. The agency demonstrates its commitment to listening to the children in placement.

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Only 20% of young people in placement over the age of 15 years have a pathway plan. The agency, however is responding positively to a recommendation made at the previous inspection to promote life skills learning opportunities for all young people in placement. The service manager has collated material and is consulting with carers on the content of a wide ranging programme designed to provide a structured life skills plan for carers to follow with their children. The carer's assessment process, particularly the competency based assessment investigates their ability to support young people's life skills learning. Contact notes and carers' supervision visit records refer to children's involvement in improving their personal skills and engaging in daily living skills. There is also reference in the young people daily logs to their response to having to do daily tasks. The approach, however, to preparing young people for adulthood is unstructured and lacking consistency of application. The carers receive training, such as the 'moving on' course, which focuses on preparing young people for independent living. The agency provides the carers with a written policy on fostering allowances and with a clear indication on what they are expected to cover. The carers confirmed that they are paid within the agreed timescale. They have sufficient financial support to provide the young people with their material needs.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

There is a good level of detail, in the Statement of Purpose, on the facilities and services which the agency offers. It includes information on the assessment of carers, the range of placements and the support given to the carers. The statement was reviewed and amended in April 2007. The children's guide, in the form of a small booklet, is written in a simple style. The children were consulted on the content and the sort of information they would find useful. Some of the children contributed to the design and content. The guide focuses on the purpose of the placement plan, a pathway plan, reviews and safeguarding. The booklet is colourfully presented with cartoon symbols and includes puzzles for the children to complete. There is a clear management structure and individual senior staff have provided the service with stability and continuity of purpose over a number of years. Roles are clearly defined and understood. The management systems support the assessment approval and review process. The staff are supervised regularly and find the process helpful. The carers comprehend the roles of the supervising social worker and the child's social worker. The office functions effectively and gives appropriate levels of support to the social work team and the carers. Recent staff retirements have reduced the staffing levels. The agency, however maintains a good service to the carers with the workload evenly distributed. The team manager is providing social work support whilst the agency recruits additional experienced personnel. The carers receive regular support through weekly telephone contact and monthly home visits. The agency continues to demonstrate its resolve to recruit a range of carers with diverse abilities, thus offering a wide range of alternative care for children and young people. There is a variety of relevant training proposed for the year 2006/2007, however most of it has not occurred. The training provision is going through a transition and that which was proposed has not been scheduled or offered to the carers. The agency has attempted to provide some formal training sessions through the carer support group meetings. The service has failed to convince all the carers of the need to further develop their skills through regular training. Other strategies to promote better attendance at training are being considered for implementation. The children's files contain all the necessary information relating to the child's history and current functioning. The children's care plans are reviewed as required and the decisions are incorporated in the updated plan. Practice records are factual and reflect the primary elements of the carers' work with the young people, including safeguarding, health and formal education promotion and social education. The agency files are safely stored and the staff and carers maintain the confidentiality of the information held on the child.

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
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Recommendations

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

- create a life skills programme for carers to use to support young people in their preparation for adulthood NMS 14
- ensure that all carers receive the appropriate training, at regular intervals, necessary to support their role NMS 23

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.