

Nexus Fostering

Inspection report for independent fostering agency

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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

Nexus Fostering is an independent agency that provides fostering service in London, the Home Counties, South East, Anglia and Midlands area of England. It operates from its main office in London and affiliate offices in Birmingham and Norwich. The agency recruits, assesses, approves, trains and supports foster carers from a range of backgrounds to provide family placements and care for children and young people who are looked after by local authorities. It employs social workers, placement officers and administrators. It also has a team of independent social workers, outreach staff and provides placements for students.

Summary

This inspection was announced. It had two main aims. One of them was to assess the fostering service provision in accordance with legislation. The other aim was to follow up on the requirements that were issued by Ofsted in November 2007 as result of an investigation. The main finding of the inspection is that Nexus Fostering provides good fostering service that is focused on achieving positive outcomes for children and young people. The agency's strategy to support foster carers and children to enjoy life, achieve, develop and make positive contributions is outstanding. The main weaknesses in the agency's provision are centred around foster carers' assessment, approval and review of the carers. The agency has already taken the appropriate steps to improve. One requirement and four recommendations were issued at this inspection.

The overall quality rating is good.

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

Improvements since the last inspection

Nexus Fostering has produced an appropriate action plan in response to the recently issued requirements. At the time of the inspection, some of the actions were fully implemented while the clear timescales were identified in relation to the others. These include training to be provided to staff and panel members to secure further and permanent improvement. The agency remains committed to good service provision and continuous development. Some of the procedures and documentation that have been reviewed, amended or fully developed from scratch since the previous inspection include the following: initial visit report and competencies, assessment process, foster carer's agreement, job descriptions for foster carers, unannounced visit form, placement agreement form, absence monitoring form for staff, Statement of Purpose, Young Person's Guide, home-working policy, style and recording guidance, employee handbook, declaration of interest/potential conflict of interest including panel members, Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) policy including secure storage, handling, use, retention and disposal of the disclosures.

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Foster carers are appropriately supported by the agency to promote health of the children and young people who they foster. Long term children's individual health needs and the foster carers' experience are taken in account as part of the matching process. Medical information is appropriately shared with the foster carers. Each child is registered with a General Practitioner and referrals to specialists, such as paediatricians or speech therapists may be made if required.

The agency and foster carers ensure that children have regular medical checks and keep up with their appointments. Written consent in relation to children receiving medical advice and treatment is available on children's individual files. Foster carers' monitoring and promotion of children's health is discussed during the supervising social workers' visits on a regular basis. The minutes of these visits are kept on the files. The agency's monthly reports that are sent to the placing authorities always contain a review of children's health for that month.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

The agency's policies and procedures safeguard fostered children. Foster carers receive training in health and safety, safe caring and behaviour management, including what to do when a child is absent from the placement. The handbook that is given to all foster carers contains clear guidelines about the best ways to safeguard, nurture and support children's development and self-esteem including keeping children safe on the internet. This is also appropriately covered in the agency's recently amended foster carer agreements. Safeguarding children is discussed with foster carers at the regular social worker's supervising visits. On occasions when potential safeguarding issues were identified, the agency made the appropriate referrals and worked closely with the Local Safeguarding Children Board and police. The agency's staff undertake annual written health and safety risk assessments of each fostering home. The agency has its own fostering panel that includes two internal and six external members. The agency receives CRB disclosures for all the panel members, but does not obtain references for the external members. There is a chair, who amongst other duties is responsible for ensuring that the panel is in quorum when conducting its business. The panel makes recommendations regarding approval of prospective foster carers and the terms on which the approval is to be given. It reviews the same on a regular basis and recommends termination of approval of foster carers, when it is necessary. An appropriate appeal procedure is in place. The panel also receives the management information, oversees the conduct of assessments and considers any other matter that the fostering service provider may refer to it. There is a written record of panel proceedings and the reasons for its recommendations. The Responsible Individual, who is a decision maker, attends the fostering panel meetings as an observer. The agency's 'Fostering panel handbook' is consistent with the National Minimum Standards and The Fostering Services Regulations. The foster carers' files contain written assessments of their suitability for that role. The agency uses British Association for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) Form F assessment paperwork and provides 'The skills to foster' preparation training. Prospective foster carer's own experience of caring for their own and other people's children is included when assessing qualities, competencies and aptitudes for fostering. Appropriate checks that include CRBs, consultation with the local authority in whose area the prospective foster carer lives and interviews of three persons nominated to provide personal references are carried out, before all this information is presented to the panel. The inspector noted that some foster carers did not have their reviews a year after the approval. This was raised with the management of the agency and they responded by appropriately amending their procedure, so that the annual reviews include foster carers who might have not had a substantive placement over their first year of working for the agency. Both the provider and the manager for this service are experienced, qualified and registered with Ofsted. The agency's staff recruitment procedure is thorough and this is clearly demonstrated by the records kept on the staff files. It appropriately safeguards children and the quality of the fostering provision.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is committed to promoting equality and valuing diversity. This commitment is explicitly included in many of the agency's policies and procedures. Nexus Fostering has a diverse staff team, foster carers and panel. Specific training sessions that focus on diversity and equality are provided for foster carers and staff. Information regarding children's needs in terms of gender, religion, ethnic origin, language, culture and disability as well as foster carers' information and experience, is maintained and taken in account when matching and monitoring the quality of the fostering service provision to a particular child. When trans-cultural placements are made, the agency works co-operatively with local authorities to bring in extra resources. This is to ensure that children receive sensitive support that appropriately nurtures their cultural identity and awareness of their heritage. Foster carers encourage children to develop skills that are within their reach, achieve, feel valued and confident. Children with disabilities are supported to maximize their potential and access a wide range of activities. The fostering service gives high priority to helping their foster carers to appropriately support children's educational achievements in accordance with their Personal Education Plans (PEP). This is discussed and recorded at each supervising social worker's visit to the foster carers. Children are also appropriately supported to develop and maintain hobbies, such as interest in music, swimming and karate. The satisfaction survey carried out by Ofsted as part of this inspection showed that both fostered children and foster carers place high value on formal education as well as 'having fun' and enjoying life. They were very satisfied with the ways they were supported by the agency to achieve that. Nexus Fostering organises activities and outings for foster carers, their own families and children they foster on a regular basis. These include visits to places of interest, going out to see shows and theatrical performances, organising football matches, meals, picnics and pampering sessions. The agency gives birthday and Christmas gifts to each fostered child and foster carers' own children. Celebratory words and messages of congratulations are regularly included in the agency's newsletters. For example children are congratulated for: 'helping their foster family', 'being a brilliant brother', 'doing well at school', 'managing their anger more effectively'.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The agency is children focused and has processes in place to encourage their contribution. Their views are sought and recorded in the regular supervising social worker's visits, as well as at the foster carers' and children's reviews. All children who responded to Ofsted's survey stated that they felt listened to. Many foster carers also highlighted in their responses the value of listening to children's views and that they felt heard and supported by the agency. Some of the words they used to describe the support received from Nexus Fostering are: 'brilliant', 'fantastic', 'friendly', 'somebody is always available to listen to the issues you may have and discuss different solutions with you'. Foster carers meetings are regularly arranged and provide further opportunities for contributing to the quality of the fostering service provision. Minutes of these meetings are taken and distributed. More informal events organised by Nexus Fostering also contribute to building relationships and strengthening the communication amongst the stakeholders. The agency sends separate newsletters to foster carers and children on a regular basis. Children have a 'kids zone' on the website and a specific e-mail box to share their experiences and views. A 'buddy-scheme' for fostered children has been introduced to assist them in developing friendships, learning from each other and empowering them to express

themselves. The agency actively promotes relationships between fostered children and their birth families in accordance with the contact arrangements as specified by the local authorities in their placement and care plans. The contact and its impact on children's wellbeing is monitored and children are appropriately supported when difficulties arise. The agency facilitates supervised contact arrangements by providing a safe space in their London office and staff. The birth parents, who sent their questionnaires back to Ofsted rated the agency's fostering provision and support as good and outstanding. The agency has an appropriate complaints procedure in place with three distinct stages and clear timescales. The agency's staff also benefit from the open communication ethos within the organisation. One staff highlighted the strengths of Nexus Fostering in the following terms: 'confidence to share one's views even if different to everybody else's; confidence that one will be listened to and taken into account; willingness to look into difficult issues, admit if things went wrong and commitment to improve.'

Achieving economic wellbeing

The provision is good.

Children who are fostered via Nexus Fostering enjoy economic wellbeing. They live in spacious, clean, comfortable homes and receive personal money and other allowances. They are appropriately assisted to develop independence skills in accordance with their age, abilities, wishes and rights. The agency gave a booklet produced by The Children's Legal Centre called 'At what age can I' to all foster carers and children. Foster carers are paid on time. There is a chapter in the foster carers' handbook that covers tax and finances. The agency provides training session on finance. Foster carers benefit from the information provided by the agency. Individual support and financial advice is also available to foster carers through the agency, if needed.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Nexus Fostering is a well organised independent fostering agency. It is committed to conducting its business in accordance with the National Minimum Standards and legislative framework. The Responsible Individual for the organisation is closely involved in the running of the service, together with the Registered Manager. Both of them take an active role in the monitoring of its quality. The registered persons are supported by three area managers and other staff with different levels of seniority and areas of work. Staff are appropriately experienced and qualified in accordance with their duties. The responsibilities and accountabilities amongst the management and the staff are clear. Non-qualified staff and students on placements receive appropriate support. All staff benefit from a good supervision system in place. Their work is formally appraised each year. They are supported to keep abreast with the knowledge, maintain their professional registrations and develop. The agency gained the 'Investors in People' award in 2006. There is a good strategy in place for supporting foster carers, that includes the appropriate training and information. The 'Foster carers handbook' and the agency's other documentation, such as Statement of Purpose and Young Person's Guide contain comprehensive information and are regularly updated. The agency has a training co-ordinator who has a lead responsibility for organising the training for foster carers and providing training advice and information to staff. Post approval core mandatory training for foster carers consists of the following training: First-aid, Child protection, Recording, Caring for sexually abused children, Managing challenging behaviour and Valuing diversity. Additional training is available on different subjects, such as Attachment, HIV/AIDS awareness, Drugs and Complaints. Training is delivered in different parts of the country, on weekends, as well as weekdays to encourage

attendance and participation. Specific sessions on 'Men in fostering' are also held. Foster carers' support groups often include presentations on topics relevant to fostering, such as Education matters, Youth offending and Family court orders. Nexus Fostering supports foster carers to undertake National Vocational Qualifications. The agency has a designated administrative team. The confidential records are securely kept. There is a clear policy regarding access to information. There are systems in place to monitor records. This includes quality monitoring of individual files for foster carers, children and staff as well as maintenance of centrally kept logs of significant events and other matters required by legislation. Monitoring processes are generally good, but as the agency has considerably expanded since it was established, some areas of improvement have been identified at this inspection. These relate to monitoring of long-term medication that is administered to foster children, respite placements within the agency and keeping an eye on incidents that are below reportable threshold. Regular meetings are organised on different levels of the company to ensure sharing of important information. The management of the agency regularly meet to look into any trends, discuss the quality of the provision and future developments. Local managers are responsible for the area budgets and receive monthly management accounts prepared by the company's secretary.

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
6	ensure that a review of foster carers takes place a year after approval. (Regulation 29.2)	24 March 2008

Recommendations

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

- review monitoring of long term medication that is given to foster children. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- review monitoring of incidents. (National Minimum Standard 4)
- review administrative records kept regarding respite placements for children who are already fostered within the agency (National Minimum Standard 4)
- obtain references for members of the fostering panel. (National Minimum Standard 30)

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.